

South African owls

Portfolio of South African Owls by Claude Gibney Finch-Davies (1875-1920). Published by the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria, 1990. Price: R31,50 (excl. GST).

Claude Gibney Finch-Davies was born in India to a British family on 24 May 1875. After having been at school in Britain he came to South Africa when 18 years old, to begin his lifelong career as a soldier. With a family background of interest in natural history (Kemp 1976) he became attracted to the birds of southern Africa, devoting his spare time to this hobby. As part of his studies, he developed an ability to portray the colours and structure of southern African birds in fine detail - the scope and precision of his effort being unrivalled to this day. In fact, his draftsmanship, coupled to a keen sense of observation led to the production of an extensive series of the most accurate bird illustrations ever produced in South Africa. After World War I he was posted to Pretoria where he had a close association with the Transvaal Museum, continuously borrowing specimens and books. Early in 1920 he was caught tearing plates of bird illustrations from books in the Transvaal Museum library. The end result was that he handed all his volumes of paintings to the Transvaal Museum as security until he could replace the books he had damaged. He died on 8 August 1920 in Cape Town.

Apart from the diurnal raptors, Finch-Davies was also fond of the nocturnal counterparts - the owls (Order Strigiformes). The 12 species encountered in southern Africa were meticulously illustrated by him, including the two species of Tytonidae and the 10 species of Strigidae. A loose leaf information sheet giving some pertinent biological data on each species (in both English and Afrikaans), accompanies the portfolio. The quality of reproduction of the individual plates (each measuring 35 cm x 30) cm is very high and the Transvaal Museum is to be congratulated in bringing Finch-Davies' works to the attention of a wider audience. It is hoped that the publication of this portfolio may contribute to raise the reputation of Claude Gibney Finch-Davies, as ornithologist and gifted illustrator par excellence of the creatures he cared for so much during his short life of 45 years.

Kemp, A.C. 1976. *The Biography of Claude Gibney Finch-Davies 1875-1920*. Pretoria: Transvaal Museum.

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