

# THE COPPER

## Conundrum

by George Gibbs

In the previous issue of BUTTERFLIES (Winter 2021) I drew attention to the need for a thorough taxonomic revision of our copper butterflies and gave an historical summary of the naming process which has given us the name *salustius* for the original type example.

Now, thanks to the efforts of Steve Wheatley of the British charity, Butterfly Conservation, who recently worked in NZ on the plight of our forest ringlet butterfly, the MBNZ has been approached by the doyen of all butterfly taxonomy, none other than Professor Dick Vane-Wright. Vane-Wright has been associated with the British Natural History Museum for 50 years and has devoted many years to progressing the publication of the famous 18th Century Jones' *Icones* paintings referred to in my previous review.

With his focus on the Jones' paintings, Vane-Wright has scrutinised the question of how and when Fabricius might have seen the first example of a NZ copper butterfly, in order to describe it and bestow the name *salustius*.

If this name truly refers to the first specimen of a copper butterfly from this country, then by implication, it was almost certainly part of the Banks Collection from Cook's Endeavour voyage. Since there is no type specimen in existence to debate, the evidence swings to Fabricius himself and how he went about his role of naming so many insects.

Vane-Wright's researches into the visits of Fabricius, who was Danish, to London and his involvement with Dru Drury, the wine merchant who traded the original butterfly specimens from worldwide collecting expeditions (e.g. Sir Joseph Banks), with the aim of compiling a collection from which Jones could make his paintings.

Vane-Wright's contribution has been to discover that Fabricius in this case worked from the paintings when allocating Latin names, not the other way around.

According to his research, Fabricius based 'well over 200 species of butterfly and a few moths that were new to science, on images he found in the *Icones*'. Most of these names, including *salustius*, were published in the *Entomologia Systematica* (Fabricius, 1793), just six years after his visit to London.

There is some debate over how long it took Jones to paint his *Icones*. Vane-Wright notes that one version estimates just three years – between 1783 and 1785 –

possibly due to misinterpretations of the dates given on the bindings. Other more realistic estimates imply it would have been more like 30 years.

What he has revealed is that Fabricius evidently made a family visit to London in 1787, when it is thought he would have studied all the Jones' paintings made up until that time. This visit enabled him to base well over 200 species descriptions on the paintings. The formal Latin names for these were published just six years later, in 1793. Although, like *salustius*, many specimens from the early voyages have been lost, but others, like the NZ red and yellow admirals remained in the Banks Collection and were named by Fabricius and published in 1795.

Duplicates of the red and yellow admiral types were lodged at Copenhagen and London by Fabricius and are still to be seen today.

It is unlikely that the final word on the origins of these names has been written. But from what I have gleaned from Vane-Wright's assessment, it would appear that our copper butterflies were almost certainly initiated from the burst of naming activity by Fabricius after he first examined the Jones' *Icones*, paintings in 1787.

Without a type specimen for the original copper butterfly found in NZ, we can never know which the multiple species of in this country received the Fabrician name 'salustius'.

Clearly, new names will be required; whether by resurrecting those from the past or creating new ones is immaterial.

The essence of my involvement is to facilitate the allocation of taxonomically valid names through the expertise of a professional taxonomist.

At present all we have are the ambiguous description of *salustius* by Fabricius, and the equally ambiguous Jones' painting.

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