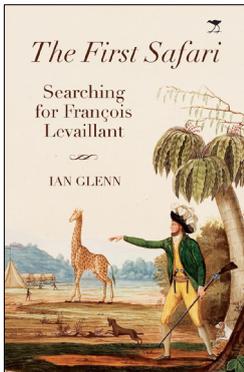




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BOOK TITLE:

The first safari: Searching for François Levallant



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ISBN:

9781431427338 (hardcover, 230 pp)

PUBLISHER:

Jacana Books, Johannesburg; ZAR260

PUBLISHED:

2018

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HOW TO CITE:

Dean WRJ. François Levallant: Explorer and biologist. *S Afr J Sci.* 2020;116(1/2), Art. #6556, 1 page. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/6556>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

29 January 2020

François Levallant: Explorer and biologist

Reputed to be the most famous ornithologist of the 1700s, François Levallant (1753–1828) made a large contribution to the study of avifauna in South Africa. Levallant’s name is frequently repeated in any African bird list, not only because he discovered ‘new’ species, but also because he carefully noted his observations on a wide range of birds and other animals.

In this very readable account by Ian Glenn, Levallant the man, not only the traveller and ornithologist, is revealed. Glenn takes us through Levallant’s early life and passions – his obsession with birds generated and fostered by his early formative years in the tropical wilderness in Suriname where he was exposed to a diversity of nature. Levallant’s parents returned to France in 1763 and his life there was somewhat turbulent and varied, with interests in hunting and taxidermy, enlisting in the cavalry, and his marriage. By 1774, Levallant’s prospects were, apparently, bleak, with nothing much to offer except his strong interest in natural history. The latter, ultimately to the benefit of South African ornithology, fortuitously landed him a sponsorship and an expedition to the Cape. The sponsor was Jacob Temminck, himself a bird collector, who used his position as treasurer-general of the Dutch East India Company to send Levallant to the Cape to collect material.

In all, Levallant made three expeditions in South Africa. The first from April 1781 to December 1781, was localised to the area around Cape Town. The second, from December 1781 to March 1783, consisted of an anticlockwise loop eastward along the coast to about Port Elizabeth, then inland to the Cradock area, and the return via the Karoo. The final exploration from June 1783 was north along the west coast to the Orange River for which the dates and destinations are unreliable. Glenn notes that trying to retrace Levallant’s travels has been difficult for anyone who has tried to follow the details of the expeditions.

It is the second expedition that gives the book its title, for it left Levallant, as Ian Glenn tells us, not only ‘transformed’ through searching for new specimens, and encountering the landscape and its people, but was also highly profitable in terms of specimens and field notes. Incidentally, many bird species collected by Levallant and described as ‘new’ were obtained on this expedition, with their descriptions and names published in *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux d’Afrique*, printed in 51 parts over a period of 17 years. Not explained in *The First Safari* is that Levallant’s published names and descriptions were in French not Latin, and thus did not constitute formal descriptions of holotypes. However, the holotypes were published by later taxonomists using Levallant’s illustrations as well as his names. The Narina Trogon *Apaloderma narina*, for example, was formally described by Stephens in 1815, although the name and description had been published earlier by Levallant.¹

Levallant was a man of many parts. He was concerned about many sociological aspects of the indigenous peoples whose land had been invaded by settlers. His views on Dutch colonial expansion, his insights into the loss of Khoikhoi land – he insists on their ‘sacred and respectable rights of property’ – and his comments on the treatment of local people by the white settlers were perceptive. Glenn deals with ‘Levallant as social and cultural observer’ very well, concluding that Levallant’s impression of the Cape was that of a ‘detached outsider’ who had an influence on later writing and thought.

In 1784, Levallant returned to the Netherlands with his bird collection, some of which was shared with Jacob Temminck, Joan Raye, L.F. Holtshuyzen and W.S. Boers. The fate of Levallant’s insect collection is not known, but the botanical specimens, according to Gunn and Codd, were largely lost at sea, although the species survive as plates in Levallant’s books.²

Glenn devotes a large part of the book to Levallant’s life in France after returning from Africa. This part is particularly well done, with persistent, thorough research, exploring every avenue of Levallant’s life while he was, in the author’s words, writing his ‘highly ambitious, highly successful [book] leading to the encouragement of some of the most beautiful ornithological books of the time’. Glenn also explains the discovery of Levallant’s bird collection, which was incorrectly listed in the register of the Paris Natural History Museum, and the important ‘map’, prepared for Louis XVI by several major artists, with its annotations referring to Levallant’s travels.

Some of Levallant’s observations of birds are summarised in a general section on Levallant as naturalist and ornithologist. His insights into certain aspects of bird behaviour, calls, and nest building have, in many cases, been supported by subsequent studies. Some of his hypotheses, however, have not been upheld by recent research, but it is to Levallant’s credit that he tested his ideas and raised questions to be addressed by later generations of ornithologists.

In his final years, Levallant endeavoured to link exploration with commercial gain, as have many others, and Glenn deals with Levallant’s complex personal life. The book also details Glenn’s own unsuccessful attempts to find Levallant’s travel notebooks but, sadly, they are probably lost forever.

Colonial scientific endeavour is generally not well covered in South Africa. *The First Safari*, while not the first book on Levallant, is a useful addition to the literature and complements other texts about him. The life of this interesting man is well worth reading.

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