

A bird in the hand: response to Franklin and Szabo

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Wayne Brennan & Daryl Wesley

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Ancient bird stencils discovered in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. *Antiquity* 84: 416–27.
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Bird stencils in Arnhem Land do not provide evidence of climate change: response to Taçon *et al.*
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Figure 1. Outline paintings thought to depict scrubfowl on another Djulirri panel (photograph: Paul S.C. Taçon; compare to scrubfowl photograph by Collins).
Click to enlarge.

We thank Franklin and Szabo for their timely response to our paper. Indeed, their response highlights the challenge of identifying depictions at rock art sites, in this case even if they are stencils. Macintosh (1977) was one of the first in Australia to warn us about the difficulty of assigning species designations to rock art images and this issue continues to dominate debate in rock art research. In this regard, opinions from a range of scientists and Indigenous people from the area in which sites are found are valuable in advancing ideas about subject identification.

But, before responding in detail, a point of clarification is in order. At the beginning of their response Franklin and Szabo state '*The Aboriginal rock art of the Arnhem Land Plateau and outliers in northern Australia provides a remarkable 50 000 year window into the cultural and environmental past*' but this is simply not true. Although some used pieces of ochre have been dated to about 50 000 years BP (Jones 1985) no Arnhem Land rock art has been accurately and reliably dated to more than 4000 years ago (Langley & Taçon 2010) and the general consensus is that little from more than 15 000 years ago is extant (Lewis 1988; Flood 1997; Chippindale & Taçon 1998).



Figure 2. A comparison of the head shape of the bird stencil to that of one of the yellow paintings (overlay by Michelle Langley).
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We do not believe the recent yellow bird paintings accurately depict scrubfowl. First of all, depictions of scrubfowl are rare in Arnhem Land rock art, despite being a food source. Second, paintings of birds that might be depictions of scrubfowl at Djulirri and elsewhere look quite different, with fatter bodies (Figure 1; and compare to the scrubfowl photograph by Collins). Third, the size of the yellow bird paintings is remarkably similar to the size of the bird stencils, as is the head shape (Figure 2). Fourth, the necks of the bird paintings are too skinny and the posture is not right for scrubfowl. Finally, like the stencils, no such bird paintings are found anywhere else in Arnhem Land. Exactly what they depict may or may not be scrubfowl but given their size, juxtaposition, proximity to the bird stencils and some features we still argue that the composition could well have been inspired by the nearby arrangement of bird stencils. And of course, Arnhem Landers invariably reinterpret old imagery within a contemporary context rather than faithfully reproducing rock art from the ancient past. So the bird arrangement does not need to be the same, exact species; in our paper we did not say it was.

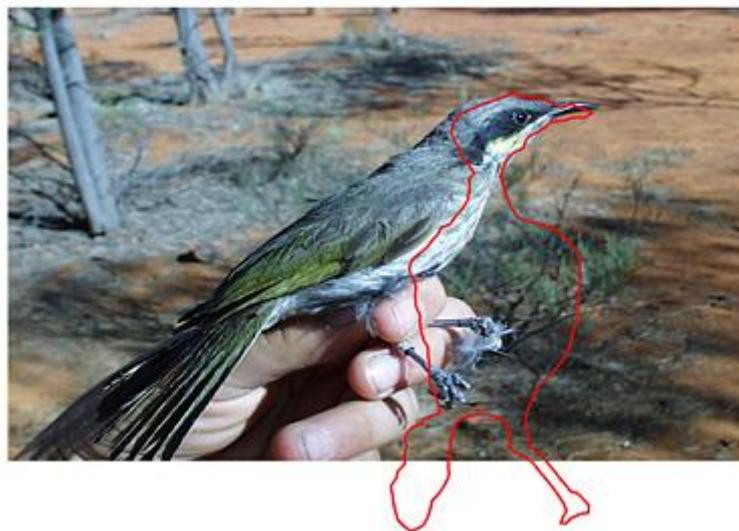


Figure 3. The bird stencil from Djulirri (Taçon *et al.* 2010) outlined in red, with a head profile of the Singing Honeyeater overlaid (photograph: Judit Szabo in Franklin and Szabo; overlay by Michelle Langley).
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We will probably never know exactly which species of bird was stenciled, especially if it was a juvenile and because the stencils were made so long ago. There is general agreement that a honeyeater was frozen in time at Djulirri but whether a species of Friarbird or the Singing Honeyeater both are found in Arnhem Land today (as we noted for the Singing

Honeyeater, Taçon *et al.* 2010: 423) and overlays of the stencil with an actual Singing Honeyeater are as suggestive as overlays of the Friarbird (Figure 3), even though the head is not exactly in profile like the stencil.

Finally, the only reference to climate change we made was at the end of our conclusion: '*It also speaks to us about climate change and the threat to small, vulnerable species so often forgotten when human concerns dominate debate about environment and heritage*' (Taçon *et al.* 2010: 426), something also referred to in the editor's introductory statement. Certainly there is no denying there has been much climate change across Arnhem Land, and the rest of northern Australia, in the past 9000 years and our age estimate for the stencils accords well with other animal stencil art and particular types of hand stencils in close proximity and in the same pigment as the bird stencils, argued to be of this age by Lewis (1988) and others. Our statement was merely a reminder that, in regard to debates about past or present climate change, the consequences affect all species, including those not normally seen as important as food or otherwise. This ancient stencil of an Arnhem Land bird, agreed to be some species of honeyeater, was for some reason important to someone in Arnhem Land long ago. Today natural and human-induced climate change and environmental degradation will impact on honeyeaters as well as other small creatures many people think are of little value. Our note was merely to remind everyone that they also are an important part of world biodiversity.

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