ASK ANY GROUP of birders heading to South America for their first visit to that continent to name the species on their wishlists and it is a safe bet that the Hoatzin Orpisthocomus hoatzin will, without exception, feature in the top ten. This iconic bird inhabits swamps and flood-ed lowland forests, and has been a source of fascination to ornithologists ever since it was first described to science. The chicks possess claws on the digits of their wings, a feature not found in any other living species but common in early birds such as Archaeopteryx. The chicks’ claws and the bizarre appearance of the adults collectively imbue the Hoatzin with an air of primitive-ness, evoking images of a time when the distinction between reptile and bird was much more blurred than it is now.

It is perhaps fitting that the taxonomic affinities of this exceedingly odd bird have been the source of more head-scratching among ornithologists than those of nearly any other species. The birds with which the Hoatzin has at various times been putatively linked make for a long list, and includes groups as diverse as rails, bustards, cuckoos and mousebirds. While groups as diverse as rails, bustards, and rails. However, when the fossil bones were subsequently re-examined by a team led by Gerald Mayr, it became apparent that the earlier assessment was incorrect and Namibiavis was, in fact, a species of hoatzin. The same team of researchers also identified another extinct hoatzin that occurred around 23 MYA in what is now south-east Brazil, and they named it Hoazinavis lucasi.

Africa and South America were once both part of the supercontinent Gondwana, but were completely separated by around 100 MYA. This was long before the appearance of any group of birds to which the hoatzins could even be remotely related and the possibility of them existing before the break up of Gondwana can safely be ruled out. So these findings of two extinct species on either side of the Atlantic Ocean immediately raise intriguing questions: how did hoatzins make their crossing – eastwards from South America to Africa or in the opposite direction? Although Hoazinavis (the fossil hoatzin from Brazil) existed some six million years before Namibiavis, Mayr and his colleagues believe that hoatzins actually arose in Africa, and dispersed from there to South America. This leaves the question of the direction in which the ancestral hoatzins made the crossing – eastwards from South America to Africa or in the opposite direction? Although Hoazinavis (the fossil hoatzin from Brazil) existed some six million years before Namibiavis, Mayr and his colleagues believe that hoatzins actually arose in Africa, and dispersed from there to South America. The researchers came to this conclusion on the basis of evidence suggesting that the ocean currents and atmospheric conditions prevailing at the time would have made a westward rafting journey more likely than an eastward one.

If the sequence of events hypothesised by these researchers is correct, hoatzins evolved in Africa. At some point before 23 MYA, they dispersed by raft across the Atlantic to South America and then existed on both continents for at least six million years. They subsequently went extinct in their ancestral African homeland, leaving South America as the sole refuge for the hoatzin lineage. It is an arresting thought that the species sometimes described as the world’s strangest bird may have had an African origin and very likely reached the New World by sea.

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