

ON THE NOMENCLATURE OF CERTAIN FORMS OF
THE DOWNY WOODPECKER (*DRYOBATES*
PUBESCENS).

BY WILLIAM BREWSTER.

IN accordance with a wish expressed by the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature at its meeting in Cambridge on November 13, 1896, I have investigated certain matters of synonymy suggested by a recent article on the Downy Woodpecker by Mr. Oberholser,¹ who proposes to separate this bird into three geographical races of which *Dryobates pubescens meridionalis*, a small, brownish-breasted form inhabits the "South Atlantic and Gulf States, from South Carolina to Texas" and *Dryobates pubescens nelsoni*, a large and relatively white form, "Alaska and Northern British America"; the bird intermediate in respect to size and coloring and occupying the region lying between the areas just mentioned being considered as representing *Dryobates pubescens verus*.

A similar division was made by Swainson in 1831, in the 'Fauna Boreali-Americana' (Part Second, p. 308), but Swainson applied the name *pubescens* to the Downy Woodpecker of British North America and renamed as a distinct species the bird which "inhabits the middle parts of North America," and that found in "Georgia" calling the former "*Picus (Dendrocopus) medianus*, the Little Midland Woodpecker" (type locality New Jersey), and the latter "*Picus (Dendrocopus) meridionalis*, the Little Georgian Woodpecker" (type locality Georgia). Mr. Oberholser of course credits the name *meridionalis* to Swainson, with an appropriate reference to the 'Fauna Boreali-Americana', but he makes no allusion to Swainson's treatment of the other two forms, nor does he give his reasons for restricting the name *pubescens* to the midland bird. In the synonymy of *Dryobates pubescens meridionalis*, however, he cites "*Picus pubescens*, Linnæus, Syst. Nat., Ed. 12, 1766, I, 175 (*part*)", the insertion of the final word in parenthesis indicating that he regards this name as only in part applicable to the southern race.

¹ Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus., Vol. XVIII, No. 1080, pp. 547-550.

Linnæus based his *Picus pubescens* on Catesby and Brisson. There can be no doubt as to Catesby's bird, for that author says distinctly in his introduction that the collections on which his work was based were all made either in "the inhabited Parts of *Carolina*" which "extend West from the Sea about 60 Miles" or "at and about *Fort Moore*, a small Fortress on the Banks of the River *Savanna*, which runs from thence a Course of 300 Miles down to the Sea, and is about the same Distance from its Source, in the Mountains." The whole of this region, of course, is included in the range of *meridionalis* and Swainson's type of that form came from the neighboring State of Georgia.

Brisson gives a detailed description, evidently drawn from a specimen in hand, but he does not mention from whence his bird came. As he is ordinarily careful to state not only the locality but the collector's name, it seems probable that in this instance he had no definite knowledge on either point, and that his statement "on les trouve en *Virginie* & à *la Caroline*" was made largely on the authority of Catesby, whom he cites in his synonymy and whose work he appears to think related to Virginia as well as to the Carolinas. He also cites Klein but this author's *Picus varius minimus*¹ was based wholly on Catesby.

Mr. Oberholser says that the Downy Woodpeckers which he has examined "from North Carolina . . . and extreme Southern Virginia, appear to be intermediate between *D. pubescens meridionalis* and *D. pubescens*; and these, although not above included, are perhaps without impropriety referable to *D. pubescens meridionalis*." If Brisson's bird really came from Virginia it was probably taken somewhere not far from the coast and in the southern part of the State. Its measurements favor this hypothesis, for they indicate an exceptionally small bird of even the southern form. It is impossible, however, to ascertain definitely from whence this specimen was derived. It may have been taken almost anywhere in eastern North America—in Canada, for instance, where many of Brisson's birds were obtained.

These facts and considerations have led me to conclude that Mr. Oberholser's position is not tenable, and that if the separation

¹ *Historiæ Avium Prodomus*, 1750, p. 27.

which he advocates be deemed advisable, we should regard the Southern Downy Woodpecker as the true *Dryobates pubescens* (Linn.), calling the bird of the middle region *Dryobates pubescens medianus* (Sw.) and that of northern British America *Dryobates pubescens nelsoni* Oberholser. The alternative would be to adopt Swainson's arrangement *in toto*, for if not applicable to the southern form the name *pubescens* is subspecifically indeterminate and Swainson was within his rights in restricting it to the Downy Woodpecker of the far north and in bestowing new names on the other two birds.

FOURTEENTH CONGRESS OF THE AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION.

THE FOURTEENTH CONGRESS of the American Ornithologists' Union convened in Cambridge, Mass., Monday evening, November 9, 1896. The business meeting was held at the residence of Mr. Charles F. Batchelder. The public sessions, lasting three days, were held in the Nash Lecture-room of the University Museum, commencing Tuesday, November 10.

BUSINESS SESSION.—The meeting was called to order by the President, Mr. William Brewster. Thirteen Active Members were present. The Secretary's report gave the membership of the Union at the opening of the present Congress as 673, constituted as follows: Active, 47; Honorary, 19; Corresponding, 67; Associate 540.

During the year the Union lost seventy-two members,—seven by death, fifteen by resignation, and fifty were dropped for non-payment of dues. The members lost by death were Henry Seebohm,¹ an Honorary Member, who died in London, England, November 26, 1895, aged 63 years; Dr. Juan Gundlach,² who died in Havana, Cuba, March 14, 1896, at the age of 85, also an

¹ For an obituary notice, see *Auk*, XIII, 1896, pp. 96-97.

² For an obituary notice, see *Ibid.*, p. 267.