



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie

The period of the nineteen-sixties may come to be known in the future as the Decade of Ponderous Tomes. Books are getting bigger and bigger. And very expensive!

Back in the eighteenth century there was a man named Gilbert White, who, in the manner of Thoreau, traveled extensively in his small corner of England. He wrote entertainingly and philosophically of these "travels" in a book entitled "Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne." This is still good reading today; and, since the text progresses at a leisurely pace and does not roam far a-field, it might well be prescribed today as a tranquillizer.

Natural history books of the present attempt to cover the world, and are far from soothing though often exceedingly stimulating and informative. I have in my possession "Living Birds of the World" by E. Thomas Gilliard (Doubleday, 1958, \$12.50). "Birds of the World" by Oliver L. Austin, Jr., and Arthur Singer (Golden Press, 1961, available locally at the reduced price of \$9.95), and "Birds of Prey of the World" by Mary Louise Grossman and John Hamlet, photographed by Shelly Grossman (Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1964, now \$25.00). The last named weighs about five pounds, and its dimensions are 12 3/4 by 9 3/4 by 1 3/4 inches. It was a Christmas gift and is superb. There is also now available "The Birds" edited by Roger Tory Peterson. This is the first volume in the Life Nature Library, reasonably priced at \$3.50 and not too huge. Finally there is the National Geographic Society publication: "Song and Garden Birds of North America" which includes recorded songs. This is available from the Society for \$11.95. Pertinent remarks on any of these or similar books submitted by banders will be welcomed.

Incidentally, where does one park these massive tomes? Recently I read a humorous bit (possibly by Russell Baker or, if not, by an equally sardonic humorist) on the subject of these super-volumes, and how they adorned coffee tables for a period of time until crowded off by newer and bigger ones. And if their prices seem prohibitively high, keep in mind the fact that they will be turning up in inventory sales and second hand stores at bargain rates in the course of time.

Another Christmas gift I received (though I'm sure the donor didn't think of it as such) is the following review of "A Dictionary of Birds."

My New Year is off to a fine start with John Given's review last month, and this one from Michael Thomas of Syracuse, New York.

Contribution by Michael Thomas:

Two books in my library have seen a good deal of use since they were published in England. Both are annotated in long hand, and since the first was published in 1813 and the second in 1833, they contain quite a lot of ornithological history. They are respectively the supplement to the first edition of George Montagu's Ornithological Dictionary (the first edition itself was published in 1802) and the complete second edition.

Montagu's work was a landmark in ornithology because it was a noble attempt to classify existing knowledge, particularly with respect to the distribution of birds in the British Isles. The fact that a supplement was printed eleven years after publication, followed twenty years later by a second edition indicates that knowledge was accumulating quite fast. By the end of the nineteenth century so much more was known about the birds of Britain that a new book, Alfred Newton's A Dictionary of Birds (1896) appeared. This was an even more remarkable volume because it established the study of birds on very respectable scientific foundations--its author, incidentally, was a founder of the British Ornithologists Union. Nothing as comprehensive as Newton's dictionary has been attempted until now, and it is fitting that the centenary publication of the British Ornithologists Union should be "A New Dictionary of Birds," edited by Sir A. Landsborough Thomson. The new dictionary (all 928 pages of it just crashed on my doorstep from England) no doubt, will soon be published in the States, since it encompasses the birds of the world rather than being confined to British birds.

The dictionary's schematic arrangement includes these sections: general; form and function; systematics and evolution; distribution and ecology; etiology; and birds and man. There is a major article on each bird group, and in many cases individual species are described and their distribution summarized - the classification follows that of G. L. Peters' Checklist of the Birds of the World.

The bander will find much to interest him, though with so comprehensive a coverage of the whole field of ornithology, each topic must be somewhat limited in scope. The section on ringing (why did rings become bands after Americanization?) notes that whilst banding was not started on any scale in the U. S. A. until after the first World War, Jack Miner was putting his Biblical quotations on duck bands in 1914. The section on migration covers the following topics: sources of information; nature and extent (local movements, vertical displacement, distance migrations, transequational migrations, oceanic migration, partial migrants, pre-migration migrants, weather movements, reversed migration, irruptions); seasons; weather influences; directions; performance (diurnal and nocturnal flight; gregariousness, age and sex; altitude; velocity, duration of flight; rate of advance; premigration state), theoretical problems and a bibliography.

The above represents but the briefest sampling of a book that will certainly be at my bedside for a month or two. There are many illustrations, both photographs and drawings, some in color. The text is liberally supplied with delicate line drawings.

This is indeed a scientific tome and, looking at the two works, new and old, one feels just a little regret at the advances made in the science of ornithology. Nowhere in the "New Dictionary" can I find anything quite as romantic as Montagu's classification of naturalists. He finds three types: rudimental naturalists who concentrate on cataloging and describing museum specimens ("closet reading" according to Montagu); literary naturalists observing living nature, and philosophic naturalists ("works consisting of personal observations for the purpose either of supporting theories (often fanciful) or of illustrating the providential wisdom of the great Creator").

When "A New Dictionary" is published in the United States I recommend it to all EBBA members and/or to their gift shopping families. It is published in England by Nelson at five guineas.

153 Strong Avenue, Syracuse 10, New York

And a contribution from Peru by Frank P. Frazier, Jr.:

It is well known that wherever the English have gone and colonized, the birdlife is well documented - hence good, complete works exist on the avifauna of exotic spots such as India and many parts of Africa. South America has not been so fortunate, and its birds have been studied almost solely by foreign visitors. Even when knowledge of the avifauna of the various countries of South America was substantially complete, as far as enumeration of species is concerned, virtually nothing was published for the public, and only very recently have regional bird books begun to appear.

"Las Aves del Departamento de Lima" is truly a pioneer work: its author, Dr. Maria Koepecke, has been Peru's only professional ornithologist since coming here from Germany around 1950 with her ecologist husband. Prior to her coming, the only ornithological knowledge of Peru had been gained from expeditions which came from time to time, collecting birds to be sent back to American and European museums, and this knowledge was and is largely unavailable to the general public, in the form of museum catalogues and articles in scientific journals.

This little book has been privately published on a very limited budget, a circumstance dictated by the utter lack of popular interest in birds in this country, but bearing in mind this factor, it has come out very well indeed.

The 313 species occurring in the Department (analogous to a state) of Lima are included, three to a page. For each species, there is a line drawing (done by Dr. Koepcke herself and, in my opinion, excellently) and a descriptive paragraph which gives the coloration in general terms, essential field marks, and notes on habitats and range. The book can be used for the coast, western Andean slopes and high Andean plateaus in Peru, bearing in mind that in the far north and in the southern highlands, a few species occur which are not included as they do not occur in the Department of Lima.

For the American reader, the book has the inconvenience of being written in Spanish -- it was intended, of course, to spur an interest in birds among Peruvians -- but its Spanish style is simple and straightforward, and should not be difficult for anyone who has a smattering of the language or of one of its Romance relatives.

As a very concise aid to identification, this book is highly recommendable to anyone who has plans or dreams of visiting the west coast of South America. And as the first popular-type publication on the birds of a region not covered by other recent books on South America, it will be a source of enjoyment and interest to many who have no immediate travel plans.

Through a special arrangement with the author, a small quantity of these books has been made available to EBBA members at the reduced price of \$2.25 (retail price \$3.50) and anyone who desires a copy should write Frank Frazier, Jr., Colmena Derecha 208, Lima, Peru. Airmail costs \$1.50, sea mail 25¢ -- but the latter is very slow, uncertain, and not recommended.

Nabel Gillespie closes the book section with this:

Come on now, banders, let's keep up this custom of unsolicited contributions. Surely many of you have coffee tables groaning under the weight of bigger and better bird books. Send us your opinion of them.

Perhaps we need something more than opinions about books. That something is a way of handling them. Mr. Thomas states that the "New Dictionary of Birds" is to be at his bedside. He doesn't mention its size, but it must be fairly large to contain all that he mentions. Perhaps some clever constructor of traps can invent a bedside contraption with ropes and pulleys which will support an immense volume somewhat in the manner of a limb in traction.

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