

CORRESPONDENCE

NOMENCLATURE IN THE GENUS *Quiscalus*

To the Editor of 'The Auk':

THE nomenclature of the forms of the genus *Quiscalus* is so involved that the student of their relationships is greatly handicapped in the treatment of his problem. *Quiscalus quiscula quiscula*, the name by which formerly we knew the "Purple" Grackle (= the complex of Ridgway's and Stone's Grackles) of the North, now proves to be properly applicable to the Florida Grackle, heretofore known as *Quiscalus quiscula aglaeus*, while the name Purple Grackle appears to have covered two forms which have been respectively described as *Quiscalus quiscula ridgwayi*, Ridgway's Grackle, and *Quiscalus quiscula stonei*, Stone's Grackle. Only the Bronzed Grackle, *Quiscalus quiscula aeneus*, remained known by the specific name under which it was described. But now comes Dr. Alexander Wetmore to tell us that *Quiscalus aeneus* of Ridgway should be known as *Quiscalus versicolor* of Vieillot, a name which, incidentally, was once used for the "Purple" Grackle. In short, every term of our grackle problem has been changed since first we attempted its solution.

I should like to consider this matter here in order that it may be disposed of before returning, later, to a study of the birds rather than of their names. However, we must bow to the consistent use of the laws of zoological nomenclature and hope that the biologist of the future will not be handicapped by their application. Meanwhile, before accepting a proposed change in names, we should be quite sure that the evidence on which it is based has been properly interpreted. Earlier authors, for example, Oberholser (Auk, 36: 550, 1919) and Hellmayr (Cat. Birds Americas, 10: 75, 1937), have considered *versicolor* Vieillot merely a new name for *Gracula quiscula* Latham = *Gracula quiscula* Linnæus. But Dr. Wetmore (Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus., 86: 230, 1939) tells us that, with Mr. A. J. van Rossem, he examined Vieillot's "type" in the Paris Museum and found it to be a specimen of the Bronzed Grackle. Their identification, of course, is final, but, one asks, what evidence have we that the specimen in question is actually the bird that Vieillot described? Vieillot is known to have objected to the use of a generic name in a specific sense and it is not improbable that his proposal of the name *versicolor* for that of *quiscula* was to avoid this procedure. In any event, his introduction of the name *versicolor* is accompanied by an apparently original description and it is on the identity of this description, not on that of the alleged "type," that it should be considered.

At this point we should have before us specimens of both the Bronzed and the Purple Grackles. Failing them, we may recall that while, *in series*, the head of the Bronzed Grackle exhibits the customary graculine variations in color, it normally is never prismatic while the body, both above and below, in breeding specimens, from southern Texas to Great Slave Lake, is uniform bronze without, normally, trace of other color. The "Purple" Grackle, on the other hand, possesses so many colors and is so variable that it is rare to find two specimens exactly alike.

Now, visualizing the two birds here so briefly described, I ask to which one Vieillot's description more nearly applies? It reads: "Quand le mâle est dans son plumage parfait, il offre à l'oeil les couleurs du prisme dans tout leur éclat; les reflets les plus riches et les plus éclatans, bleus, pourpres, violets, dorés, verts, se jouent sur un noir velouté; le bec et les pieds sont d'un noir mat; l'iris est d'un blanc d'argent. Longuer totale, onze pouces."

In my experience not a single character Vieillot mentions is applicable to the body of the Bronzed Grackle, while they may all be found in every typical specimen of the "Purple" Grackle.

Assuredly the evidence presented by Vieillot's own words in his original description should carry more weight than a label the history of which is unknown. Moreover, we have the admission of J. Berlioz, Curator of Birds of the Paris Museum, that mistakes have occurred in labeling the birds now under his care. Of the Buffon Collection, for example, he writes (J. Berlioz, 'Les Collections Ornithologiques du Muséum Paris,' *L'Oiseau et la Revue Française d'Ornithologie*, no. 2, p. 238, 1938): "It is partly among these birds of Sonnerat, partly among others of more doubtful origin, that one finds still those mounted specimens with a note written under the pedestal: 'Type of Buffon.' In view of the many later rearrangements undergone by the collection, the authenticity of such a note may perhaps not always offer an absolute guarantee."

And of the Vieillot birds he adds (*ibid.*, p. 239): "In any case, a few years later the collection of mounted birds must have been sufficiently rich in specimens from various sources so that Vieillot could depend on it in writing the ornithological part of his 'Dictionnaire des Sciences Naturelles' in 1816. A certain number of 'types' of Vieillot were verified and reclassified by Pucheran, assistant naturalist in the Museum, toward the middle of the 19th century, and are still to be seen in the collection."

In my belief, therefore, Dr. Wetmore has been misled in his identification of the specimen of Bronzed Grackle as the type of Vieillot's *versicolor* by an error in labeling. This belief is, I think, warranted not only by the obvious inappropriateness of the name *versicolor* to the Bronzed Grackle but by the admission of Dr. Berlioz to the occurrence of similar errors in the collections under his care.

The final disposition of the name *versicolor* is a question in itself but since, in my belief, it might be applied to any one of the three forms of *Quiscalus* of the Atlantic States its use would always be attended by uncertainty and I suggest that it be not used at all.

I trust, therefore, that before reaching a decision, the A. O. U. Committee on Nomenclature will consider the view of the case here presented; and I am sure that Dr. Wetmore is too good a zoologist not to rejoice with me if the verdict is against him.

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