

## CORRESPONDENCE

## THE EUROPEAN WIDGEON IN NORTH AMERICA

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':—

The thesis of Dr. E. M. Hasbrouck's recent article on the European Widgeon in North America (Auk, 61: 93, 1944), that this species probably breeds somewhere in the New World because of the widespread records of its occurrence, appears sound. But his listing of only thirty-two reports (including fourteen sight records) from eastern New York and Long Island gives a very inadequate notion of the bird's status. In fact, on Long Island the European Widgeon has for many years been a regular winter resident and spring and fall migrant, which can be seen on any winter day by merely going to one of its favorite haunts, such as the Hempstead Reservoir and the adjacent ponds. Cruickshank in his 'Birds Around New York City': 94-95, 1942, points out that it "now occurs every year as a transient and winter visitant . . . Though generally occurring singly or in twos or threes, there have been extraordinary flights on Long Island when I have seen as many as fourteen in a day . . . In recent years I have regularly found at least one drake on the Hempstead Reservoir from late October to late March." Off Long Island the bird is rare around New York, but occasionally occurs even in the urban parks, *viz.*, drakes have been seen in Van Cortlandt and Bronx Parks this very winter.

There may be significance in the circumstance that the local status of that other supposed accidental, the European Teal, has until very recently resembled that of the Widgeon, even the same waters being favored (Cruickshank, *t.c.*: 98-99, 1942). But since 1941, unlike the Widgeon, the Teal's numbers have drastically diminished, and in 1943 not a single one was reported in the region, though its usual haunts had been frequently visited by many observers.

EUGENE EISENMANN

New York, N. Y.

## THE POSSESSIVE IN VERNACULAR NAMES

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':—

The possessive case has been used in all editions of the Check-List of the American Ornithologists' Union to date in vernacular names of birds indicating ascription to an individual. In practically all cases their origin is in a technical name but not necessarily that recognized as standard by the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature. While scientific nomenclature is not the Latin language, rules harmonious with the practices of that language are observed in forming technical names. Thus if a bird is named for, or in honor of, or is dedicated to, an individual, the technical name is a Latinization of the person's name, employing the genitive case. On the other hand, the vernacular names are regarded as part of the English language.

It would prevent confusion if it were realized that the English possessive is equivalent to the Latin genitive. Consider what our best dictionaries have to say on the point. As a definition of "genitive," the Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia (1913 ed., vol. 4) states: "an epithet applied to a case in the declension of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, etc., which in English is called the possessive case, or to the relation expressed by such a case: as *patris*, 'of a father, a father's,' is the genitive case of the Latin noun *pater*, a father . . . a case in the declension of

nouns, adjectives, pronouns, etc., expressing in the widest sense a relation of appurtenance between one thing and another, an adjectival relation of one noun to another, or more specifically source, origin, possession, and the like; in English grammar, the possessive case." If a later authority is deemed preferable, Webster's New International Dictionary (2nd ed., 1937) may be cited. "The genitive in English now prevailingly denotes the relation of possession, and is therefore commonly called the *possessive*."

In the light of these facts, it would seem that there should not be objection to following, in names derived from those of persons, the custom of the language as to indication of the possessive. While usage varies in this respect as it does with every other feature of language, it is fairly crystallized, is plainly defined in dictionaries, and can be followed by different writers with essentially uniform results.

It is true that the United States Geographic Board has abandoned the use of the possessive in the terms upon which it rules, but the case is different as those names are not based on Latinized genitives. Moreover, the Board's usage is not universally approved and the difficulties cited below in connection with the vernacular names of birds also apply to the geographic terms. Some still think the possessives more appropriate and euphonious, *e.g.*, The Hudson's Bay Company.

The most common objection to the use of the possessive case is that the bird does not actually belong to the man. It is not likely that anyone so maintains, but since the implication in that direction is almost as strong in the Latin genitive of the scientific name as in the possessive of the vernacular, what merit is there in advancing the argument—a puerile one at best?

The claims that the possessive names are useless and confusing can well be answered together. Putting vernacular names in the possessive case is useful precisely because it prevents confusion in the instances of all personal names, which as mere words have definite meanings that may apply to birds. There is a great deal of difference, indeed, as we use or omit the possessive case in bird names embodying human surnames that have attributive, descriptive, or locative significance in common language. The following gleaned from the index of the current Check-List (4th ed., 1931) illustrate the point: Bank, barn, bean, bell, black, blue, brown, canada, clapper, cliff, dawson, English, fish, fox, gray, green, house, kern, king, large, long, marsh, palm, pine, rock, sage, snow, stone, storm, summer, tree, wayne, white, wild, winter, wood.

Others only a little less familiar as names of people could be cited, and there are many among popular names of birds that come in this same deceptive group. That the meaning of ascriptive names is clear without the use of the possessive case needs no further refutation. On the contrary, many of them shorn of the possessive sign would be definitely misleading. For instance, I have seen Steller jay altered to stellar jay by an editor who could see no sense to the former appellation and decided to give it meaning.

The objection as to difficulty of pronunciation applies to only a small proportion of the terms as Coues's, Mearns's, etc. In most cases the pronunciation is simply that of the plural form of the word which is perfectly familiar, *e.g.*, bells, kings, rocks, etc. If supporters of this argument were consistent, they should work for the abolition of all plurals.

A compromise that would seem to offer a way out to adherents of both sides of the controversy would be to omit all personal references in standard vernacular names. Among precedents are: Florida Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo l. alleni*),

Arizona Hooded Oriole (*Icterus c. nelsoni*), and Pink-sided Junco (*Junco mearnsi*). This remedy might tempt us to increase the number of bird names referring to localities, which are already too numerous, and could advantageously be replaced by others of descriptive significance.

W. L. McATEE

*Fish and Wildlife Service*  
*Chicago, Illinois*

RHODE ISLAND BIRDS

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':—

Dr. Frank M. Chapman feels that Miss Dickens's record of the Black-throated Gray Warbler in Rhode Island should be sent to you to be added to the records of that species near Miami, Florida, made last winter (See Louis A. Stimson, *Auk*, 60, no. 3: 452-453, July, 1943). The actual date of observation of this warbler as made by Miss Dickens at her home on Dickens' Point, Block Island, is May 14, 1943. The June issue of our 'Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island' (4, no. 3: 2, 1943) gives her account and also (p. 1) the Editor's comment. In Forbush's 'Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States,' I find the Black-throated Gray Warbler pictured on Plate 84 and the following references with description:—Recorded in Milton, Mass., May 22 and 23, 1918 (a pair, male heard in song)—Miss Ella F. Luther; Lenox, Mass., Dec. 8, 1923, one seen and found dead the next day; specimen now in the collection of the Boston Society of Natural History; Malden, Mass., one seen May 18, 1924, an adult.

The same number of the 'Bulletin' (p. 3) notes the gift of the Harry S. Hathaway collection of Rhode Island birds and birds' eggs, library, and field records to the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. These represent some fifty years of collecting, observation, and study, and possess an increasing historical significance. A detailed description of the collection is in preparation.

ALICE HALL WALTER

67 Oriole Ave.  
Providence, Rhode Island