

### Correspondence.

#### A Plea for the General Use of Scientific Names.

From time to time various persons, presumably intelligent collectors, have asked why we cannot dispense with scientific names of birds and use the English altogether. Such a peculiar proceeding has even found favor with the prophet of all good amateur ornithologists,—Dr. Coues. Mr. Hornaday<sup>1</sup> and Mr. Stephens<sup>2</sup> demand that all birds and mammals be supplied with common names. Their claim seems to be that trivial names are more easily comprehended by the public than scientific names. It has been my experience that *Ardea virescens* means, to the average person, quite as much as Green Heron. Although some names as duck, sparrow and woodpecker have ideas hitched to them, such concepts are usually worthless. On this point we will speak later.

Another class demanding attention and common names, is the great tribe of half scientists—those who find a pleasure in knowing something of the relationship of animals. They are terrified, however, by scientific names and are content to keep such in a closed "key" or "check-list," knowing the birds by their number as if they were so many prisoners. Why not use the name that every one will know? The scientific names must be learned sometime, thus doubling the work. Why not learn them at once?

Names of Latin form are a necessity for several reasons, so evident that it seems a waste of space to mention them. In the first place they are a necessity because not all people speak one language. Latin being the most universally known is the best language from which to build our handles, graspable by scientists of whatever nationality. Secondly, it is impossible to find enough common names to supply all the species of birds. Hear now what Dr. Allen says:<sup>3</sup>

"As regards the names of species of animals or plants, but a small proportion are ever recognized in any vernacular tongue, because unknown to the average layman. When discovered and made known by science, a vernacular name is often invented for them, as well as a scientific one. Yet many of the most remarkable and familiarly known animals and plants never acquire a name other than the scientific one, compounded of Latin or Greek, which the laity adopt in common with scien-

tists, and never even dream that they are using the technical language of science. Hippopotamus, rhinoceros, and the names of many of our ornamental plants are cases in point."

With many of our American birds we use the generic names as trivial terms. No one has trouble with phainopepla, leucosticte, junco, pyrrhuloxia, merganser or vireo when used as common names; perhaps they look more terrific when printed in italic. If I am not mistaken Vireo and Junco were adopted by a vote of American ornithologists as being preferable to Greenlet and Snowbird.

Another reason for using Latin names is that they show us something of the relationships of animals. Thus if one speaks of a *Dryobates* or a *Dendroica* or a *Salpinctes*, we know nearer what group of species is intended than if woodpecker, warbler or wren is used. That is to say, the scientific is applied with more exactness than the common name.

There is another trouble with trivial names. They are coined by anyone who takes a notion and while not differing so far from scientific names, they do differ in being purely local. The result is that one bird species may have many names, or, that several birds may have the same name. Thus *Colaptes auratus* has been found to sport at least thirty-six common names.<sup>4</sup> Again the name Yellow Hammer is used for *Emberiza citrinella* in England, for *Colaptes auratus* in the eastern states and for *C. cafer* on this coast.

Mr. Gordon Trumbull,<sup>5</sup> at great pains, has collected the names used by gunners for the various game birds. This book illustrates the great confusion which comes from the use of common names.

It might be possible to have uniform common names for well known birds, but when we come to peculiar forms as *Pyrrhuloxia* or *Phainopepla*, we have no common names and the trouble is still worse as we go into Mexico or Africa. Then again even if we found it possible to use English names for all mammals and birds or even all vertebrates, there are still unprovided for hundreds of thousands of invertebrates as suggested by the Rev. W. F. Henninger.<sup>6</sup> Not only have we a host of living forms, but to be consistent we should have to find names for the palaeontologist with his thousands of vertebrates and invertebrates.

If, as Mr. Beal<sup>7</sup> has told us, grangers prefer and use scientific names and terms, certainly ornithologists and oologists who pretend to know something of science can use scientific names. I would suggest that we do

away with trivial names in our literature and correspondence at least. This would simplify things immensely. Not only would space be saved in faunal lists but in exchanging specimens one would need be familiar with only one set of names. It is extremely annoying to receive a list of trivial names and have to translate them before knowing what species are offered. Ichthyologist, mammalogist, herpetologist, and invertebrate systematists seem to struggle along without the use of trivial names; why cannot ornithologists? If we had a list of common names which were ordinarily recognized, they would be useful, but such a thing is impossible, and why we should advocate the use of such names as smew, jabiru, limpkin, parauque, grassquit and dickcissel is a fact I do not understand. Scientific are more accurate than, and as readily used when known, as trivial names, in fact, are often preferred. The recognition of both increases, without any accompanying advantage, the labors of memory; common names can never become to any extent so well known as the scientific. These are the reasons for which I advocate abandoning trivial terms.

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1 *Auk* XII, 91.

2 *idem* 194.

3 *J. A. A. Auk* I, 303.

4 *Audubon Mag.* I, 101.

5 *Names and Portraits of Birds.*

6 *Osprey* IV, 12.

7 *F. E. I. Reel, Auk* XII, 192.

### Importance of Accuracy in Lists.

Every bird student and collector will read with pleasure such lists as that of Mr. Price on the Birds of the Lower Colorado Valley, and that other lists are to be published from time to time. At the start, however, I wish to give a word of caution against placing in such lists any bird that has not, without a shadow of doubt, been identified either by actual specimens secured or by familiarity with the species. While I do not wish to detract from Mr. Price's observations, a careful perusal of his list shows that nineteen out of ninety-one birds mentioned are either doubtful or simply a guess as to their identity.

In this age of careful and systematic research our lists, which are to be the basis of all future work in that line, should contain only actually identified species. In connection with such a list, a sort of supplementary one should follow, giving all information possible as to birds that were observed but of whose identity there was a doubt. In other words, leaving

for the future observer a chance to follow up such observations and earn for the bird a place in the list proper.

Every observer has to fight constantly against the inclination to identify a bird when he feels in the bottom of his heart that he is not quite sure of it. So he may put it down with more or less elaborate notes which may be confirmed afterward by some observer with more time or better facilities, or it may not. In the one case by a lucky guess he places on the list a name which rightfully belongs there only after identity by another. In case of an unlucky guess he has placed on record something that causes more or less confusion to others for years to come.

So I say put in the lists only such birds as are without question and absolutely identified. The principal value of these lists will be to define the geographical range of species and subspecies and in some cases the lines are so finely drawn that identity in the field, excepting under the most favorable conditions, is almost impossible. In such cases enough specimens should be secured to settle the matter. If this cannot be done then the fact that cormorants, or whatever the bird may happen to be, has been seen should be mentioned in the supplementary list, leaving the identity of the species to whoever may follow, after which it may rightfully belong in the list proper.

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### Book Reviews.

NATURAL HISTORY OF THE TRES MARIAS ISLANDS, MEXICO. By E. W. Nelson, *North American Fauna* No. 14, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, April 29, 1899, pp. 97.

This paper contains all the information which the Department of Agriculture has secured through the work of Mr. Nelson of the Biological Survey, who thoroughly explored the Tres Marias group in May, 1897, making collections of birds and mammals and securing also specimens of reptiles, fishes, mollusks, crustaceans and plants, on all of which complete reports have been given in the present work. The general description, birds, mammals and a partial bibliography of the islands are by Mr. Nelson.

From the introduction it appears that the islands have been known since 1532 but no scientific work was accomplished there until 1865 when Col. A. J. Grayson visited the group. The four islands are 65 miles from San Blas, and the highest of the group, Maria Madre, reaches an elevation of 2,000 feet. The islands are mountainous and fresh water is scarce in summer. Mr. Nelson records 83 species and subspecies of birds from the group.