

THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume XIII

May-June, 1911

Number 3

THE LITERARY AND OTHER PRINCIPLES IN ORNITHOLOGICAL WRITING

By MILTON S. RAY

FROM time to time, in our various ornithological journals, appears criticism of what is termed "popular" ornithology. To discuss this and similar matters the present article is written. I consider the use of the word "popular" in connection with ornithological writing to be rather indefinite and misleading. If the line be drawn between scientific and unscientific ornithology the difference I think would be more clearly defined, for in my opinion any article treating of bird life or bird anatomy, wherein exact facts are given without any deviation from the truth, is scientific no matter in what particular style it is written, popular or otherwise.

To some, however, an article must fairly bristle with Latin before it becomes of value. To such, a check-list of exclusively Latin names is scientific; but add the vernacular as well, together with pertinent field notes, and although the article has gained instead of lost, it is now deemed semi-popular. I appreciate the advantages of Latin as an international language in nomenclature, but here, I think, its advantages end. The former custom of giving all the birds foreign names as well, has, too, a certain merit. I have an old English work which treats almost every bird in this fashion, the description of the raven beginning for instance: "Corvus corax, the Raven. This well known bird is the Korax of the Greeks; Corvus of the Latins; Corvo, Corbo, and Corvo Grosso of the modern Italians; El Cuervo of the Spaniards; Corbeau of the French; Der Rabe and Der Kohlrabe of the Germans; Korp of the Swedes; Raun of the Danes; Corbie of the Scotch; Cigfran of the Welsh; Kaw-kaw-gew of the Cree Indians and Toolloo-ak of the Esquimaux." I can read this with patience and some interest but when it comes to the

work of such extremists as may be seen for instance on page 23 of *The Auk*, vol. xvi, I desire to protest. Here the subspecific characters of a very questionable subspecies of *Hylocichla* are given in this way. "CHARS. SUBSP.—*Hylocichla H. u. ustulatae similis, sed hypochondriis et partibus superioribus pallidioribus ac minus rufescentibus.*" Alas! poor English, to the writer, evidently seemed inadequate to explain these intricate differences, so it became necessary to resort to a language worse than foreign. Dr. Samuel Johnson has said, speaking of certain writings of Addison in Latin, that "when matter is low or scanty, a dead language, in which nothing is mean because nothing is familiar, affords great conveniences, and, by the sonorous magnificence of Roman syllables, the writer conceals penury of thought often from the reader and often from himself." There are other instances, I think, beside certain works of Addison in Latin, to which this is also applicable.

One of our foremost ornithologists has sought to differentiate scientific and popular ornithology by the separation of the study of dead birds from live ones, and at first glance this may perhaps seem a very pleasant arrangement. In the museum the corpse is measured, dissected, its every wing and tail feather counted, and every curve of its bill or claw, and often trivial differences in coloration noted. Why do not these same exact methods prevail in the field? The answer in my opinion is because the work of the bird anatomists, following as it does certain set and well defined lines is by far the simpler. If field-work, which they are pleased to call "popular" ornithology, is so simple why can not some of these closet naturalists spare a few hours in the field and settle some of the little problems which puzzle us poor field ornithologists, such as comparative velocity of bird-flights, migration, instinct, susceptibility to the charm of certain snakes, the cause of the heavy proportion of infertile eggs in certain species, decoy nests, the possible use of bird sentinels in nesting time, the motionless flight of the gull with and against the wind, the cause of tender shelled eggs, the reason for spotted eggs when not explainable by the theory of protective coloration, etc., etc. I believe much work in the field and in the museum, as well, must be done before these problems are solved; yet certain writers contend that articles dealing with such subjects are necessarily "popular." Surely they are! Because the live bird is, and always will be, more interesting than a dead bird; but what folly to insist that the study of one is more scientific than the other!

There are certain non-essential things not directly connected with the study of bird life, that can, I think, be eliminated in the preparation of a manuscript without the latter losing any of its scientific value. For instance, in describing the nest of a killdeer as merely a small collection of even-sized pebbles, if one should enlarge and give the measurements, shape and kind of each pebble, would such information be of any particular value? Yet, on the other hand while sometimes equally irrelevant information is given, certain seemingly unimportant details are passed unnoticed. An instance of this latter sort, liable perhaps to have been overlooked if it had not been so frequent, was the finding at Lake Valley last June (1910), all told, five nests of the House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis*) which were in close proximity to those of the Western Robin (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*). Perhaps these cases were simply the result of accident. The nests of the House Finch in every instance were the last built, but this fact proves little as this is in accordance with the usual nesting dates of the two species in the valley. In a region overrun with chipmunks, whose depredations on bird life are incalculable, a desire on the part of the House Finch to gain protection by propinquity to the home of a larger and more combative bird is certainly an interesting trait and worthy of

further investigation. Another instance was the finding, in the above locality, of several deserted nests of the Western Robin and the Sierra Hermit Thrush (*Hylodichla guttata sequoiensis*) containing either two or three apparently fresh eggs, while a dried up egg-shell lay beside them. I suspected whatever agency had destroyed the one egg was incapable of destroying the others, and concluded it to be the work of some insect. It was only last year, however, that I was afforded the opportunity of solving it. I came across deserted nests of eggs of both the above mentioned birds. In each nest an egg had been clawed, and the nest was swarming with ants. Whether the birds had deserted just after the egg had been clawed, or on the arrival of the ants I am not prepared to say.

It is a mistake, I think, to abbreviate in any way the Latin name even if it exhaust every letter in the alphabet; for its chief virtue lies in being an *exact* name and this is lost when the name is not given in full. An instance of this kind occurs in the work of a very thorough ornithologist and one of unquestioned ability, and may be seen on page 424 of Davie's *Nests and Eggs of North American Birds*, 5th Edition. A nest is stated to have been placed "in a Negundo 30 feet high." I suspect this originally stood *A. negundo* and was misprinted to its present form, and that it was intended to be an abbreviation of *Acer negundo californicum*, the Cut-leaved Maple. Surely if it was worth while using the Latin term it was worth while giving it in full, otherwise why would not the vernacular name have sufficed?

No one can but realize the monumental work that has been done by Ridgway in the interests of ornithology, nor doubt its scientific value. Yet the writer must acknowledge in perusing that great book, "The Birds of North and Middle America", that he is puzzled to know the object of the vague and scattered descriptions of eggs given. These are almost absent in the earlier volumes but quite common in vols. III and IV. As they stand I do not see how they can be of much use to the student of oology, and if they are considered of value why were they not given uniformly throughout the work?

Personally I am opposed to the present rush to name new subspecies based on the ideas of a single worker, often on doubtful or insufficient evidence, frequently on a single skin, and, as recently, on only a portion of one. These I think only tend to hinder our progress in the study of geographical variation, for, when passed upon by the authorized judges, the past has shown that over half of these new subspecies are bowled over like ten pins, although their remains clog our literature for years afterward. If a constituted body has the authority to determine the standing of these claimants to subspecific rank why would it not be the better plan to first submit the specimens with their proposed name, etc., to the committee, and such as are favorably passed upon given out for publication?

I favor, too, set vernacular names based on the true relationship of birds, and I am opposed to calling, for instance, a falcon a sparrow hawk, or a turkey vulture a turkey buzzard simply because the latter names are the most familiar to the general public. The public needs education not misinformation.

As to the Latin names, like many others I would like to see them possessed of a cast iron stability. But as long as certain priority hunters are allowed to, and persist in delving into long forgotten, obscure and musty books, to find out what some one called a certain bird in 1847 or some other year, it appears the ceaseless change will continue. And all to what purpose? The Check-List as it stands is ample for all purposes, I think, and a new canon should declare it permanent, allowing no change except cancellation where a supposed species or subspecies is found nonexistent, or change in a generic name where the species is found to have been placed in the wrong genus. And after all what reasons can be given against

stable nomenclature, except mostly those of sentiment? Suppose some early writer did call the Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis* in Trego's Geography in 1843 or some other obscure book? If he did not care enough about publishing it in the proper channels why should we take the trouble to resuscitate a name that now lies buried? And as a fact these early workers were in the true sense seldom discoverers of many of the species they named, for many of these birds were known by name to the Indians for untold centuries perhaps, before the white man came. And that the former were often close observers of bird life can be seen by perusal of those unique articles in the earlier volumes of *The Osprey* by Chief Pokagon of the Pottawattomies: "Ke-gon Pe-nay-sey and Win-ge-zee,"¹ "Au-mon Re-nay-shen,"² and "O-jaw-aw-ne".³ There is something pathetic in the writings of this old Indian chief, almost the last of a vanishing race, telling, and with a rare command of language, of youthful journeys from his wigwam through the unbroken wilderness to study the birds.

Ridgway has said that "the classification of birds, their synonymies * * * * is scientific." This is no doubt true, but to me the continual wrangling and wrestling over priority seems a rather mild form of it, and I think it is apparent that no matter what arguments are offered in favor of the present system, that it is detrimental to the advancement of ornithology, and proof lies in the fact that even some of the museums, wearied by the endless change of names have adopted the vernacular in labeling skins. I have little doubt that a post card ballot of active ornithologists would show an overwhelming majority in favor of nomenclatural stability.

Unscientific ornithology, such as those inexact, careless or exaggerated articles which frequently appear in current magazines or newspapers, merits but a passing notice. Most of these articles are soon forgotten, as they deserve to be. Yet even though they misinform, as they serve to interest the general public in bird study they are to some extent beneficial. The most glaring collection of mis-statements I ever read was published in the *San Francisco Call*, February 3, 1895, entitled "The Singing Birds of California." Illustrations from Wood's Natural History were used in connection, and our state credited with such surprising species as the Vervain Hummingbird, Chaffinch, Yellow Hammer,⁴ etc. The text is on a par with the illustrations and a very short excerpt will suffice: "The orchardist does declare war against the yellow-hammer which belongs to the family of buntings and is cousin to the ortolan. He feeds on almonds when they are young and milky and they make the bird very toothsome picking for the epicure. He has a cry rather than a song which is variously translated." Perhaps in this latter respect there will be found considerable resemblance between the cry mentioned and the bird of the excerpt itself.

The opinion seems prevalent that the combination of a good writer and a good ornithologist is rare, and that the polish literature gives an article on ornithology is detrimental to its interests. With those who hold such views I beg to differ. If one refers to the work of almost any of our foremost ornithologists it will be found, I think, that while their style is not highly figurative, for the occasion seldom demands it, it is almost always fluent, forceful and clear. In fact the true scientist, is, I think, one who has mastered the intricate details of his work and is able to tell of them. If he lacks the flow of words to depict his discoveries or theories in accurate, clear and convincing language how can we much believe in his accom-

1. The White-headed Eagle and the Osprey, Vol. I, p. 51.

2. The Chimney Swift, Vol. I, p. 120.

3. The Bluebird, Vol. II, p. 102.

4. Not *Colaptes cafer collaris*; the bird in the cut is evidently *Emberiza citrinella*.

plishments? I can see no need for this endeavoring to take away the literary value from ornithological writing, for I consider it a decided asset. I have read articles on subjects of little range, and that usually are of a rather dry nature, yet written in such an entertaining way that they were equally as interesting as some experiences in the field, and yet not a whit of their scientific value was lost. The writer who inspires, instructs; and he is one who possesses true enthusiasm, accurate knowledge and the mastery of word values.

Audubon, famous as an ornithologist, has had some of his writings placed among the world's literary classics. One cannot read Bendire without appreciating his delightful style, and these are only a few of many. For files of *The Auk*, *The Osprey* and our own CONDOR contain articles which aside from their scientific value must be given a high rank in a literary way. The high water mark in the latter respect is reached by Welch, I think, in his famous "Echoes from an Outing." I frankly confess that this fascinating reverie was instrumental in luring me off to Fyffe in the Sierran wilds one summer, and as a result I have journeyed to some point in the region almost every year since. It has been said that Welch's article is not scientific on account of its lack of the definite Latin names, and because of this must remain buried where it now is. Perhaps as far as scientific records are concerned this may prove correct, but I believe it will receive a place in literature and still be enjoyed, while descriptions of some of the myriad subspecies of song sparrows, which brought joy to the hearts of their discoverers, are buried beneath the dust of years. True literature is not for an age but for all time, and an example is shown by the work of Gilbert White, which loses none of its interest, and continues to be reprinted, year after year. Where White gains is the felicity he has for blending real information and literature.

And I contend further that not only does literature make scientific ornithology more readable and interesting but that it is also a positive *aid* and that at times ornithological science must lean heavily on its helpmate, literature. Has our advance in ornithology been so great that the help literature gives can be cast aside entirely? If one desires to learn of the song of the Hermit Thrush or Water Ouzel will it be found in the bulky technical works? In fact is bird song itself not rather art than science? Can one learn ALL of the everchanging iridescence of the throat of a hummingbird, or the rare painting on a falcon's egg by such a flat description as purple no. 38 or red no. 122? I maintain that there are *certain* things in ornithology that require both literature and science jointly to be properly described.

It is a generally accepted fact, I believe, that many readers shun the strictly technical articles, and this I attribute to a number of causes. The principal reason, I think, is that most articles of this nature treat of geographical variation, a subject which has lost interest because the standing of so many of the subspecies is seldom a settled fact. Other reasons are that many technical articles lack the very literary quality I have spoken of, and also that many readers have not acquired a taste for comparative anatomy. A reader voiced this latter sentiment in the technical *Auk*, vol. xx, page 234, to which the editors replied in what I considered a surprisingly frank and rather un-*Auk*like fashion, saying in part: "It is the aim of the editorial staff of *The Auk* to cater especially to the popular side of ornithology, to furnish to the amateur readers papers that they will enjoy and find profitable. The technical side will always take care of itself; the demand for space for such contributions is always greater than the supply and it is papers of this character that get the cold shoulder and not those of a popular character, provided of course they contain something worthy of record."

While I realize the wide gulf that must ever exist between poetry and orni-

thology, to close the present essay without some reference, at least, to the highest of all forms of literature would be to leave it in a sense incomplete. Although it has often been stated to the contrary I hope to show that the possession of the poetic temperament does not necessarily incapacitate one for scientific work. Many instances in proof of this could be given, but a few will perhaps suffice as well. One of these is the case of Alexander Wilson, whose standing as an ornithologist is unquestioned. A poem by Wilson is reprinted in *The Osprey*, vol. III, p. 98. Here in our own club we have Mr. Lyman Belding who has done much conscientious bird work. He is a poet as well, and verse entitled "The Sierras in June" appeared in vol. II of THE CONDOR. Still another case is that of Hudson Maxim, the great English inventor, who is also a poet of no mean order. *The Literary Digest*, vol. 41, no. 14, in reviewing Maxim's "The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language," states in part as follows: "The mere fact of his writing such a work, is in itself interesting; for, apart from its distinctive merits, it gives new evidence of the versatility which so frequently characterizes high intellectual talents. That an eminent scientific inventor should appear as an expert critic of poetics will, undoubtedly, surprise many minds; but many others will remember how philosophers have come to recognize it as axiomatic that men of large capacity are capable of varying their achievements according to volition in many directions * * *. It is somewhat startling to find a foremost scientist affirming that poetry has a stronger hold on us than science itself * * *. But the chief charm of the literary feat, for most readers, may be found in the plunges made by the author himself into poetical composition."

Birds, ever especial favorites of the poets, have inspired such immortal masterpieces as Shelley's "To a Skylark", and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", and no one I think can hear the song of the Water Ouzel amid the roar and spray of some mountain torrent, or the cold, pure music of the lone Hermit Thrush in some dark wooded canyon, music like that of the masters, apparently simple but profoundly deep, and not become appreciative to some extent of the sentiment that moves the poet. At times I have felt this spell myself, but poetical composition does not come easily to me and I have written but little, while that published is limited to a few lines in *The Auk* of October, 1906, and those given at the end of this article. For these latter lines I make little claim for merit, and no doubt those who have taken up this branch of literature will be of the opinion they should have been written in the octosyllabic couplet rather than in blank verse. In this instance, however, the latter serves my purpose best as I desire to show that it is the metre and rhythm, and not necessarily the rhyme that gives the word pictures their sentimental setting. Poetry at its best excels in the indelible imprint it leaves on the minds of those susceptible to its influences, and there are certain famous passages that haunt one's memory forever. Great condensation too is another of its virtues and to take a very modest example, this closing poem, for instance, would no doubt tax twice the number of words in prose. I may say in explanation I spent two weeks on the Farallon Islands in May and June of 1904, and anyone interested will find the birds and particularly the remarkable nests of the Rock Wren described at length in the October *Auk* of the same year.

BIRDS OF THE FARALLONES

And while it yet was spring the sea-bird hordes
 Would come, to make the isles their summer home;
 The laughing murrets that crowded shelving cliff

And dark surf-echoing cave; the cormorants,
 Jet fishermen and gatherers of mosses gay,
 Who on the terraced rock their cities of weed
 Would build; web-footed pigeons of the sea
 That whispering, cooed along the spray-tossed shores;
 The snowy gulls with mouse-gray backs and black-
 Tipped wings, that plundered all their feathered kin;
 The queer-beaked puffins with long flowing curls
 That in the rock recesses lived; and with
 The night, from sea, and from their burrows came
 The auklet-thousands with weird cries; and from
 The crannied rocks the perfumed petrel,
 Daintiest traveller of the sea, lone welcomer of storms.

But all this noisy crew gave nought to the isles
 Of song. Yet, wandering with the winds
 From granite gorge or sea-opposing cliff
 Rare melody would come: the rock-wren's song;
 That oft the islanders would pause to hear,
 So wild and free and crystal clear it was!
 So strangely sweet, so ever new! And they
 Had found where paths by myriad pebbles paved
 To hidden bowers led; quaint tiny caves
 Wherein a floor was made of tide-worn stones
 And bones of furred and finned and feathered tribes,
 Long-bleached by sea and sun and inlaid bright
 With bits of abalone pearl, while scattered lay
 A world of treasure! No jackdaw's cache
 Ere rivaled the wealth of these Salpinctian homes.

NESTING HABITS OF THE WESTERN FLYCATCHER

By HARRIET WILLIAMS MYERS

WITH ONE PHOTO

ON June 17, 1910, I made a trip to Camp Rincon, in the San Gabriel Canyon, for a week's bird study. From Los Angeles we went by trolley to Azusa, and from there 14 miles by stage through the San Gabriel Canyon to the camp, which is very near the San Gabriel River and has an elevation of 2000 feet. One of the pretty trips from this camp was to a place called Fern Canyon. It extended about one half mile into the mountains and was so narrow in many places that it was little more than a trail beside a small stream. The banks rose high above our heads and were overgrown with shrubs and trees. Alders predominated, but there were also rock maples, oaks, sycamores and bays.

On June 21, at almost the end of the canyon, in an alder tree that grew close beside the water, I discovered a pair of Western Flycatchers (*Empidonax difficilis*) feeding their young. The nest was on the southeast side of the tree in a crotch made by a dead stub a foot long. There were no leaves near it, so our view was