

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

I am naturally grateful to Clell Peterson for his kind words about my book, but I did not actually have the pleasure of meeting T.A. Coward. He did, however, devote an essay to jizz in his book *Bird Haunts and Nature Memories* (1922), where he acknowledges its Irish origin, adding that "possibly the word has never before been written." He also says it cannot be clearly defined, though the following extract makes its meaning clear enough:

At a distance too far away to see details of form, colour, or pattern, so precious in the eyes of the systematist, he sees a bird and recognises it. He says that it is a chaffinch, a lark or a sparrow; but how does he know? Shape, size, manner of flight, or maybe note, is the reply. Yes, but there is something more; something definite yet indefinable, something which instantly registers identity in the brain, though how or what is seen remains unspecified. It is its jizz.

In fact, the best field descriptions are those which most successfully find the words to describe jizz, but sometimes one cannot find these words. Thus, when last February I saw some snipe feeding in a tank in southern India, I realised that they were not quite right for the familiar Common or Fantail Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*). Later, I found that they were much more likely to be Pintail Snipe (*G. stenura*), which is "indistinguishable in the field" but much the commoner species in South India, but I was quite unable to put into words what made me think they "were not quite right."

Readers with access to a file of *British Birds* may be interested in the recent (1984/85) correspondence on jizz (Vol. 77, pp. 16, 204; Vol. 78, pp. 251-2, 356-7).

Sincerely,  
Richard Fitter,  
Drifts, Chinnor Hill,  
Oxford OX9 4BS  
England.

Dear Ms. Drennan:

I was tempted to write Bob Arbib after his disparaging comments on "jizz",\* but Clell Peterson's letter in the Winter issue finally prompted me to get going.

The birding use of "jizz" originates from a delightful essay by T.A. Coward in his *Bird Haunts and Nature Memories* (Warne, 1922). I could go on to paraphrase the essay, but it's only three pages long, so I'm going to photocopy it and send it along. Perhaps if Bob had seen the essay first, his view of the word might be a little different! It must have made a wide impact: I used the word for years without realizing the rest of the birders over there were doing the same.

Those of us who came to bird watching (birding was not coined then!) in the United Kingdom during the last war will remember the name of Coward with affection. He was a prolific author, and in those pre-Peterson days, his books helped sort out the confusing array of birds and other things. He was an all-round naturalist, and must have encouraged many others to follow the same direction.

Congratulations on the continued strengthening of *American Birds*. The added colour pages really added interest in the Spring 1986 issue.

Yours sincerely,  
Clive E. Goodwin,  
45 La Rose Avenue,  
Weston, Ontario,  
CANADA M9P 1A8.

## "JIZZ"

A WEST COAST Irishman was familiar with the wild creatures which dwelt on or visited his rocks and shores; at a glance he could name them, usually correctly, but if asked how he knew them would reply, "By their 'jizz.'"

\* "... an atrocious British coinage which means, roughly, the sum of every thing about the bird which aids in identification that cannot be completely described—an amalgam of character, personality, gestalt, essence—a term that cries out to be replaced by something better, perhaps simply 'feel'. . ." R.S. Arbib in *American Birds*, Volume 37, Number 2, page 127.

What is jizz? The spelling is uncertain, probably its author could not have informed us, whoever its inventor was; it is certainly not in most dictionaries. Possibly the word has never before been written, so that we are justified in spelling it phonetically. We have not coined it, but how wide its use in Ireland we cannot say; it may have origin in this one fertile Celtic brain, or it may have been handed down from father to son for many generations. One thing is certain; it is short and expressive. If we are walking on the road and see, far ahead, someone whom we recognise although we can neither distinguish features nor particular clothes, we may be certain that we are not mistaken; there is something in the carriage, the walk, the general appearance which is familiar; it is, in fact, that individual's jizz.

Jizz may be applied to or possessed by any animate and some inanimate objects, yet we cannot clearly define it. A single character may supply it, or it may be the combination of many; it may be produced by no one in particular. As a rule it is character rather than characteristics, the *tout ensemble* of the subject. Perhaps the outdoor naturalist, and in particular the field ornithologist, realises the full value of jizz better than most people. At a distance, too far away to see details of form, colour, or pattern, so precious in the eyes of the systematist, he sees a bird and recognises it. He says that it is a chaffinch, a lark, or a sparrow; but how does he know? Shape, size, manner of flight, or maybe note, is the reply. Yes, but there is something more; something definite yet indefinable, something which instantly registers identity in the brain, though how or what is seen remains unspecified. It is its jizz.

That mental picture recorded through the eye is accurate in proportion to our familiarity with the species; the more familiar we are the less we note except the jizz. The passing curlew may have a long curved bill, a pale lower back, a strong distinctive flight, we knew these characters were present, but we did not actually see them; we saw a curlew. Curlew flashed into the brain without pause for mental analysis, for we noted the jizz. I am often asked the question which the Irishman was asked; I know of no better answer than his.

Personal experience has proved that a skin, a cabinet skin, may be more difficult to recognise than a living bird. In the skin we see certain patches of colour, markings, or patterns with which we are unfamiliar on the bird in the field. They are described in the textbooks it is true, but they are not the points which catch the eye when the bird is alive. In addition all the pose, attitude, and habit-character is lost when bird becomes specimen. Its jizz is gone. The systematist, used to handling these specimens, contends



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for birding.

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that identification by impression is less sure than by study of detail, which is in the main true, but then, even if an error is made, the bird is still alive! That to the field naturalist as well as the humanitarian is an important point.

How often we hear disputes as to the value of the drawing or the photograph as the more satisfactory portrait of the bird; how futile is much of this discussion! The taxidermist, too, is accused, often with reason, of presenting an effigy devoid of character. But there are pictures and pictures, photographs and photographs, stuffed birds and stuffed birds; it is not the drawing, the negative, or the set-up skin which shows the bird, but the ability of the artist, whether draughtsman, photographer, or taxidermist, to catch the jizz. I have in mind some slight pencil sketches by Mr. Archibald Thorburn, one of a tawny owl, one of a pintail; there is little detail, but a world of jizz. In my room is a print from a photograph taken by Mr. O.J. Wilkinson; it shows a bird perched on a stump, nothing more; yet in every curve and detail we see at once a living spotted flycatcher. In the "Sportsman's British Bird Book" are a number of illustrations photographed from specimens mounted in Rowland Ward's studios; I have not seen the originals, but whoever mounted some of these birds was an artist; he knew how to record jizz.

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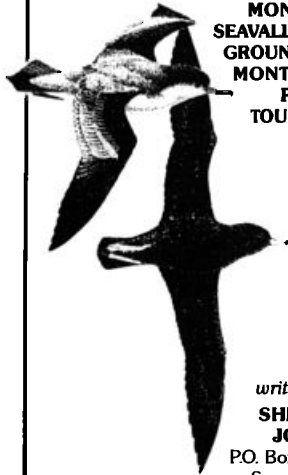
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Jizz, of course, is not confined to birds. How do we recognise the bank vole, seen for a second in the lane, the long lean rat which appears and vanishes like a grey streak, the pipistrelle flitting in the dusk round the barn? How do we know the daisy in the field, the sturdy oak? Is it by colour, size, length of tail, or shape of wing, by petal, form of leaf, or fruit? No; the small mammal and the plant alike have jizz. We do not stop to look for detail, to ask ourselves what we saw; we know. Jizz may deceive us; that is our fault, for each and every thing has its distinctive jizz; if inexperienced we may fail to discern it.

To learn the jizz should be the object of every field naturalist; it can only be learnt by study of wild creatures in their natural surroundings. The seagull in the aviary, the lark in the cage, the rabbit in the hutch have lost more than half their jizz; the specimen in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases has lost it all. The representation, whether drawing, painting, or photograph, is not faithful according to the artist's skill in registering what his eye sees, but in reproducing that mental picture which exists in his very soul. Ability to portray jizz is a psychic gift.

Reprinted from "Bird Haunts and Nature Memories" (Warne, 1922)

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