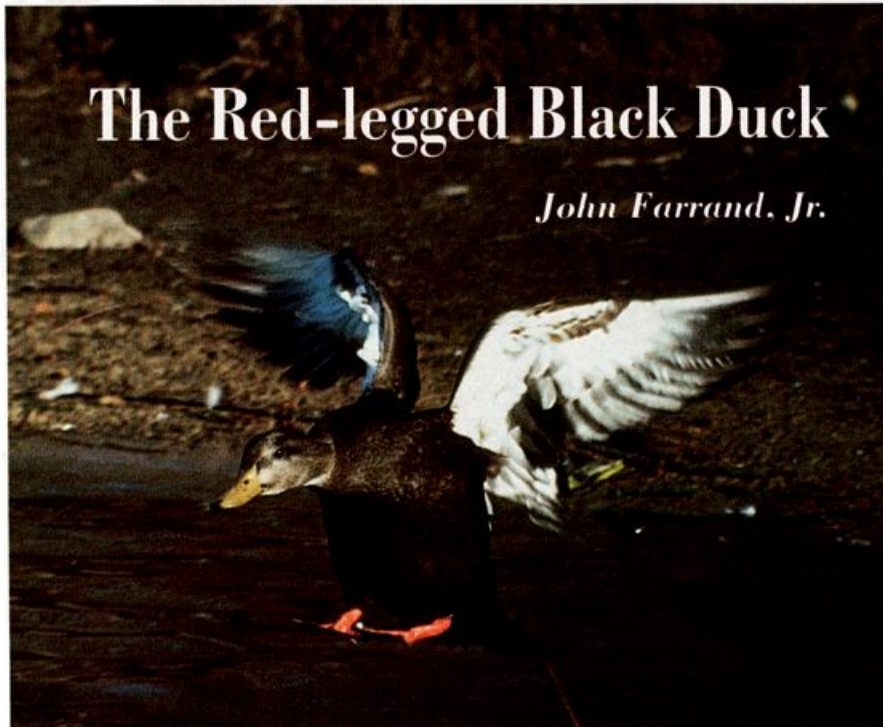




MOMENTS IN HISTORY



"Paper after paper declared that the Red-legged Black Duck was nothing more than the adult male of the Black Duck." Photograph/W.A. Paff/VIREO (p1513/003).

BY THE LATTER PART OF THE 19th century, most duck-hunters from Newfoundland to Virginia knew that there were two kinds of black ducks. The "summer black duck," a small bird with a dusky olive bill and brownish legs, was common in spring, summer, and early fall. The other bird, which gunners called the "winter black duck" or "red-leg," had a shaggier head, a yellow bill, and bright red legs. These red-legged birds arrived in late September or October, were common all winter, and disappeared in March and April.

Few hunters concerned themselves with what these two ducks were, or why they differed, but the most experienced sportsmen thought the large, red-legged birds were adult males and the smaller brown-legged ones were females. Ornithologists, too, paid little attention to the matter, calling all these birds the Black Duck (*Anas obscura*).

But then William Brewster, the dis-

tinguished ornithologist of Cambridge and Concord, Massachusetts, a founder of both the Nuttall Ornithological Club and the American Ornithologists' Union, and namesake of the William Brewster Memorial Award, or "Brewster Medal," the A.O.U.'s highest honor, turned his attention to the question of these two ducks.

In *The Auk* for April 1902, Brewster declared that the red-legged birds were an undescribed subspecies, which he named the Red-legged Black Duck (*Anas obscura rubripes*). Besides having red legs, it was heavily streaked on the head and throat, had a yellow bill, and was larger than what was now the "typical" Black Duck (*Anas obscura obscura*). Its breeding range was unknown but lay somewhere to the north, between Hudson Bay and Labrador.

Although it had been proposed by one of the country's best-liked and most respected bird men, things

did not go well for the Red-legged Black Duck. In 1905 Charles Wendell Townsend politely recognized Brewster's race in "The Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts," but noted that while the two ducks could be distinguished in the field, capable gunners thought the red-legged birds were adult males, and that the timing of their appearance and departure was like that of adult male Red-breasted Mergansers. He added that he had no firsthand knowledge of the birds that bred in the Essex marshes.

Then things became really complicated. Someone discovered that the Black Duck's scientific name, *Anas obscura*, really belonged to an Old World duck. Following the rules that govern such matters, the American bird had to be called *Anas rubripes*, Brewster's new subspecies name was the only one available for the whole species.

This change was just a nuisance for most ornithologists, but it had at least one convenient result. The committee in charge of the A.O.U. *Check-list* was then preparing the third edition Brewster was on the committee, but several of its members had doubts about his subspecies. They quickly adopted the name *rubripes* for the species, and ignored the question of subspecies altogether. But the "typical" Black Duck now had no name.

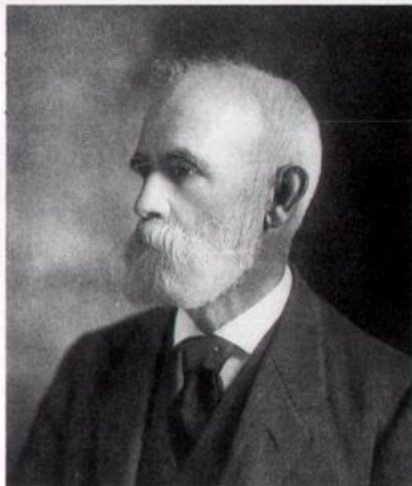
Brewster regretted both his friends' lack of enthusiasm about the Red-legged Black Duck and the confusion over the names. In April 1909, he published a second paper in *The Auk*. He gently chided the committee for taking no action on his subspecies and restated his belief that it was a good one. He took little satisfaction from the fact that his subspecies name *rubripes* had now become the name of the whole species. Because of the "sad fate" of the now nameless typical Black Duck, he dubbed it *Anas rubripes tristis*—*tristis* from the Latin for "sad."

At that point a formidable new figure entered the picture. Jonathan

Dwight, M.D., was the leading authority on molts and plumages. He had learned how to make bird skins from Brewster while he was a student at Harvard, and had gone on to assemble a huge collection of North American birds that now resides in the American Museum of Natural History. Like Brewster, he was destined to be President of the A.O.U., and like Brewster, he was a member of the *Check-list* committee.

In *The Auk* for October 1909, Dwight published a paper he called "The singular case of the Black Duck of North America." Obviously delighting in his own invective, he declared that there was no Red-legged Black Duck, and that these birds were indeed adult males. "The pitfalls...into which even the most eminent authorities may fall are singularly illustrated in a full discussion of the case," he wrote. "If an ornithologist of Mr. Brewster's ability can go astray in his conclusions, what may not the rest of us do?" Because the leg color of these ducks can be seen in the field, he even took a swipe at what was then a very small birding community: "The opera-glass contingent seems to have missed an opportunity for making observations that would be of value."

Brewster was a gentle and scholarly man who disliked controversy, but he could hardly let this sarcasm go unanswered. The matter of the Red-legged Black Duck, he wrote in July 1910 in his third paper in *The Auk*, "is dealt with by Dr. Dwight in a style so terse



William Brewster, a gentle and scholarly man who disliked controversy. Photograph/*The Auk*, Vol. 37 (1920).

and masterful as to recall Julius Caesar's laconic but all-embracing message, *veni, vidi, vici*." Of himself, he said: "Thus, like some poor crow, shot and hung up in a cornfield to keep others of his wanton tribe from molesting the precious grain, am I singled out and conspicuously branded to serve as a wholesome example to the ever increasing horde of reckless describers."

Brewster acknowledged that he might be wrong about the Red-legged Black Duck, but asserted that the weight of evidence still supported his case, and ended his paper by saying: "If, perchance, it be decided against Dr. Dwight, I promise not to insist on his serving as a warning to anyone. Should the spirit of charity and forgiveness...be expected to go further than this?"

The case went on for a long time, and was eventually decided against Brewster. Paper after paper declared that the Red-legged Black Duck was nothing more than the adult male of the Black Duck. But a surprising number of authors continued to mention it, and some gave it a heading as if it were a good subspecies. In 1923, in Arthur Cleveland Bent's "Life Histories of North American Fowl," the Red-legged Black Duck was given the full treatment, with more than four pages. Although it had not been recognized in the third edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list* in 1910, when Brewster was still alive, it was listed in the fourth edition in 1931, 12 years after his death in Cambridge at the age of 68.

Not until 1943, four decades after Brewster had proposed it, did the his subspecies finally begin to slip into the

graveyard of unsuccessful scientific names—the "synonymy," as it is called in taxonomic circles. In that year Terence M. Shortt, the eminent Canadian artist and ornithologist, thoroughly discussed the whole matter in the pages of *The Wilson Bulletin*. There was no Red-legged Black Duck. "*Anas rubripes tristis* and *A. r. rubripes* are one and the same." The differences between them are due to changes of age and season.

The durability of Brewster's supposed race is remarkable, or "singular," to use Dwight's word. Despite the weight of evidence against it, the stature of those who argued against it, and the fact that the species is a well known and thoroughly studied bird, the Red-legged Black Duck survived for decades. Even today it is occasionally mentioned. This is due not to any great power that Brewster had, but to the fact that his colleagues held him in high esteem. His obituary in *The Auk*, perhaps the longest ever to appear in its pages, was the lead article in the volume for 1920, ran for 23 pages with three photographs, and was accompanied by other memorial articles and appreciations. There has probably never been an American ornithologist more universally liked and admired than William Brewster.

Although he defended the Red-legged Black Duck to the end, Brewster was never bitter about the opposition it encountered, and seems to have been more wounded than angry at the sarcasm directed at him by Dwight. Only one point roused him to genuine annoyance. In supplying the "typical" black duck with the name *tristis*, or "sad," he was expressing his strong objection to the changing of long-established names.

But he had one consolation, he thought. "Fortunately there are the English names of birds to which one may turn with blessed sense of relief because of their comparatively fixed and stable character. For they have changed but little since the days of Wilson and Audubon, although purists have not failed to suggest that they should be critically looked into and perhaps extensively emended. Heaven forbid that this ever come to pass!"

Heaven forbid, indeed. ■

—506 East 82nd Street
New York, NY 10028



"Although he defended the Red-legged Black Duck to the end, William Brewster was never bitter about the opposition it encountered, only wounded at the sarcasm." Photograph/*R.Villani/VIREO* (v05/2/017).