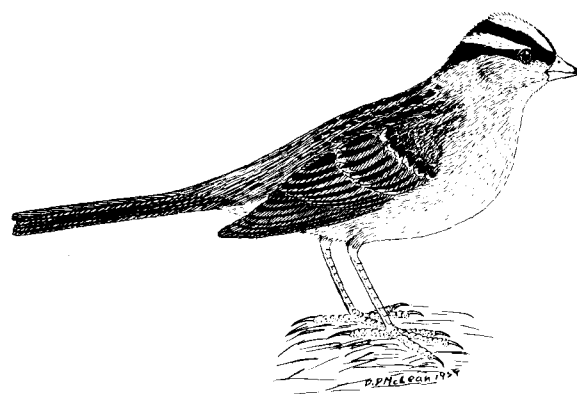
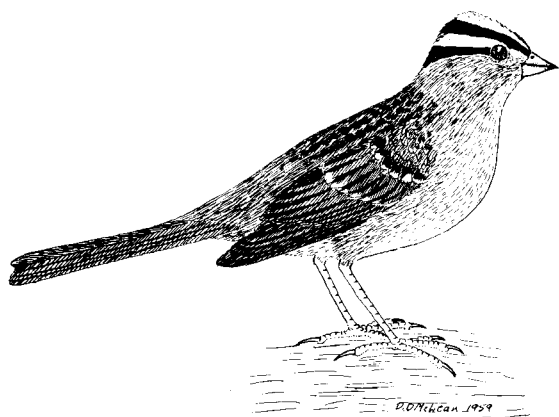


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## Possible Pitfalls in Museum Specimen Data

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Daniel Gray's recent interesting article on aging and sexing American Redstarts (*EBBA News*, 36: 143-146) and Mrs. Foy's follow-up (*EBBA News*, 37: 43-44) prompt me to write about some of the problems that can arise when using museum skins.

Unless a person is thoroughly familiar with museum work and techniques he tends to assume that data on labels are **invariably** correct. They are not. Collectors, preparators, curators, and museum helpers are people, and although we try to be

scrupulously accurate in everything we do, errors can occur.

The most common mistakes on labels are probably in the age and sex designations. The sex marked on a label should be (and, of course, usually is) based on the careful examination of the internal gonads of the bird after it was skinned. In very small birds, however, it is easy to mistake the paired adrenal glands (which lie close to the gonads) for the tiny paired testes in a non-breeding male, or to miss the

right testis or vas deferens of a young male and thus think it is a female. One really needs a strong lens to sex the "carcass" of something like a non-breeding hummingbird, warbler, or kinglet, and such lenses are not always available in the field where most skinning is done. Gonads are also about the first things to deteriorate in birds that have been dead too long, or that have been frozen and thawed before they are skinned.

In addition, some of the old-time collectors occasionally sexed "obvious" birds by their plumage without checking the gonads. Unfortunately it was not the custom, as it is now, to include documentation of sexing on the label. Now we know the utility of making numerous label notations — measurements of the gonads, perhaps a sketch of them, descriptions or pictures of skull pneumatization, notes on the extent of the molt (if any), etc. In the old days it was considered perfectly sufficient to state the locality, date, sex, and name of collector, and one is fortunate to find **that** many data on some old labels. In the early days the specimen itself was the important thing, and the data were secondary.

Many of the problems with sex designations on labels are also found in the age notations. Some collectors never stated the age of a bird on its label. Others made notations only if it was not an adult. Still others included an age designation but did not indicate how it was determined (and hence a clue as to how accurate it was).

This brings to mind another source of error that can be made by someone inexperienced in museum work: the wrong interpretation of (otherwise correct) label data. Over the years some notations have changed in meaning; some have become standardized to mean a single thing whereas they used to mean several different things; still others have different meanings in different parts of the world; and a few have dropped out of use altogether and thus have no meaning left for a modern worker. For instance, geographic designations are notoriously changable — viz. the many different names for African countries in the last few years. These changes can be more subtle, however, and may not be immediately apparent unless one considers the date the specimen was taken. For instance early specimens marked as collected in Utah may actually have come from California — at the time that Utah's borders extended well into what is now California. Age designations may also mean many things, especially the notation "juv." on old labels which can refer to any bird that has not attained the definitive

adult plumage, no matter how many months or years old it may have been when collected. The sex marks (♂ and ♀) have now become standard, but did you know that the female sign upside down (a circle with a cross on top) used to signify a male? And beware of interpreting a date such as 04/06/74: an American, perhaps especially an American bander who has become thoroughly used to the Bird Banding Laboratory's "standard" system of month/day/year, will read that date as April 6th; a European or someone who is equally used to the "standard" scientific system of day/month/year will read the same notation as June 4th.

Many museums and private collectors attached their own uniform labels on birds specimens acquired through purchase, exchange, etc. Data were copied from the field collector's original label onto the new label. Erroneous transcriptions were all too common, especially if the handwriting on the original label was ambiguous. "Cal." was read as "Col."; "V.cruz" (for Veracruz in Mexico) was read as "Venez."; figures such as 1 and 7 or 7 and 9 were confused; the old sign for male mentioned above was interpreted as female, etc. When the original label was left attached to the skin these points could be checked, but all too often the original labels were discarded and only second-hand data remain with the specimen. Such transcribed data are always subject to doubt.

Therefore when you run across a museum specimen that doesn't seem right to you, don't accept what the label says as unquestionably correct, and don't try to interpret a notation if you're not absolutely sure what it means. Ask the curator or someone else who knows the collection well, who has had years of experience in interpreting the labels in that collection. He probably will know which collectors have proved to be highly reliable in their aging and sexing and which have not. He should have learned the idiosyncrasies of certain collectors' notations, and he also should have become an expert in identifying and reading handwriting on labels — often the first step in the detective work on an ambiguous label.

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