

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

In the December, 1957, issue of the *Wilson Bulletin* (pp. 364-367), Irby Davis contributed some useful information on the habits of some little-known Mexican birds. The material in his note undoubtedly represents a significant addition to the literature of Mexican birds, but certain of Davis's remarks call for comment.

Mayr, Linsley and Usinger (1953. "Methods and Principles of Systematic Zoology," p. 4) point out that "The amateur will always play a most important role in assembling much of the raw material with which the taxonomist works, but he needs a broad background and special training if he is to make direct taxonomic contributions of the quality which will be required in the future." One group of amateurs who have much to contribute in the way of information useful in helping to determine relationships consists of the "field students" for whom Davis has elected himself as spokesman. As evidenced by many recent taxonomic studies, such matters as vocalizations, reproductive behavior and feeding behavior are being utilized as clues to relationships where they appear to be pertinent. Without an understanding of other types of evidence invoked in taxonomic studies, however, and without the "broad background and special training" mentioned above, the "field student" cannot appreciate the *relative* significance of his observations. When he attempts to make taxonomic deductions directly from his field notes, the results are all too often unfortunate. The Davis paper provides an example. Davis has ventured to apply his field studies to classification in two instances at the generic level and one at the specific level. I will take these up one by one.

"*Antiurus maculicaudatus*".—Davis has apparently copied this misspelling of the specific name (properly *maculicaudus*) from Cory (1918. "Catalogue of Birds of the Americas," pt. 2, p. 135), since the correct spelling was given by Ridgway when he introduced the generic name *Antiurus* (1912. *Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington*, 25, p. 98), and later by Peters (1940. "Birds of the World," vol. 4, p. 201) and Friedmann, Griscom and Moore (1950. *Pac. Coast Avif.* no. 29, p. 157). Mentioning that the latter authors have placed this species in the genus *Caprimulgus*, Davis states "However, it has habits so different from typical members of *Caprimulgus* that it would seem best to retain the older classification." This is the only justification offered for the revival of the generic name *Antiurus*. But what are the "typical members of *Caprimulgus*"? Perhaps it may be that the Mexican Whip-poor-wills with which Davis is most familiar are the *atypical* species. Peters' Check-list includes no less than 39 species under *Caprimulgus*. Is Davis prepared to state which of these have "typical" habits? Is he familiar with the habits of *C. europaeus*, the type species of the genus? Is he certain that the habits of *ridgwayi* (which he includes in *Caprimulgus*) resemble those of *europaeus* sufficiently for a "field student" to consider the two species congeneric? And it is scarcely necessary to point out that "different habits" *alone* are hardly justification for generic separation.

"*Empidonax mexicanus*".—Incredibly, the only justification offered for considering *Aechmolophus mexicanus* a member of *Empidonax* is that "field students always attempt to look it up in that genus when they first encounter it." Davis goes on to say that "It would seem to be helpful to recognize the bird as belonging to that genus." Surely this is a novel approach to taxonomy! Perhaps the next step will be to combine the genera of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Hutton's Vireo, since Peterson points out that the two may easily be confused in the field. It might be pointed out that Dr. Zimmer, who was certainly conversant with the taxonomy of the Tyrannidae, specifically stated in his original description of *Aechmolophus mexicanus* (1938. *Auk*, 55, p. 663) that it "has no close relationship" to *Empidonax*, and later refers to "superficial resemblances in color

and size to *Myiochanes* and *Empidonax*." But perhaps Dr. Zimmer's opinion should not carry the weight of that of the "field student" who does not notice the long, pointed crest of *mexicanus* because it is "more often than not decumbant [*sic*]."

"*Vireo semiflavus*".—Davis writes "It does not seem likely that any field student would take seriously the suggestion made by some taxonomists that it is a race of the White-eyed Vireo (*V. griseus*)." This statement reflects a common misunderstanding among amateurs unfamiliar with the principles of systematics. When a taxonomist unites two forms into a single species, one does not become a race of the other; the two are equal components of one species. If *griseus* and *semiflavus* are considered conspecific, the fact that the combined species takes the name *griseus* is purely a nomenclatorial technicality; the Peten Vireo is not a race of the White-eyed Vireo any more than the other way around.

It happens that most modern taxonomists do *not* follow Hellmayr in his "lumpings" within this portion of the genus *Vireo*. But the only statement of Davis that appears to be presented as evidence against the Hellmayr treatment (other than the "field student" sentence quoted above) concerns the dark iris color of *semiflavus*, but surely Davis is familiar with the geographic variation in iris color of *Cassidix mexicanus*, *Cyanocorax yncas*, *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*, and others.

It should be re-emphasized that I do not minimize the importance of the study of the living bird to taxonomy. This information should certainly be made available, but its proper evaluation should be left to those with the background and training to place such data in proper perspective with data obtained from other methods.—KENNETH C. PARKES