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CHAPTER 9

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUBSPECIES: A CASE STUDY OF SAGE SPARROWS (EMBERIZIDAE, AMPHISPIZA BELLI)

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ABSTRACT.—Subspecies have been viewed as important biological entities that provide evidence of adaptation and early stages of speciation and that stimulate biological research on behavior, ecology, and other non-systematic questions. However, the history of subspecies and the lack of congruence with molecular data have led to questions about whether they help or hinder studies in avian biology and conservation. The Sage Sparrow (*Amphispiza belli*) provides a case study for examining the significance of subspecies. Of the five named subspecies, three breed in the continental United States (*A. b. belli*, *A. b. canescens*, *A. b. nevadensis*) and have been studied and debated for decades regarding their systematic relationships and status. I review this history and summarize our current understanding. In this particular case, subspecies have helped our understanding by alerting researchers to interesting geographic and behavioral patterns that otherwise might have been overlooked.

Key words: *Amphispiza belli*, geographic variation, intergradation, mitochondrial DNA, morphology, postbreeding movements, subspecies.

La Importancia de las Subespecies: Un Estudio de Caso sobre *Amphispiza belli* (Emberizidae)

RESUMEN.—Las subespecies han sido consideradas entidades biológicas importantes en el estudio de adaptaciones y estados tempranos de especiación. Además, su estudio ha estimulado investigaciones no sistemáticas relacionadas con la ecología o etología de los grupos estudiados. Sin embargo, la historia de las subespecies y la incongruencia que existe a veces entre datos moleculares y morfológicos, nos han llevado a preguntarnos si éstas facilitan o dificultan los estudios sobre la biología y la conservación de las aves. *Amphispiza belli* es un buen modelo para examinar la importancia de las subespecies. De las cinco subespecies conocidas, tres se reproducen en el área continental de los Estados Unidos (*A. b. belli*, *A. b. canescens*, *A. b. nevadensis*). Estudios sobre la relación filogenética entre estas subespecies han generado debates durante décadas. En este trabajo hago una revisión bibliográfica y resumo el estado actual de la información disponible. En este caso particular, las subespecies han ayudado al desarrollo de nuestro conocimiento, mostrándonos patrones geográficos y de comportamiento que de otra manera hubieran pasado desapercibidos.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF subspecies has been hotly debated among ornithologists for decades (e.g., Wiens 1982, Zink 2004, Phillimore and Owens 2006, Rising 2007). In North America, this contentiousness can be attributed to several factors. First, most avian subspecies were described

in the late 1800s to early 1900s (Fig. 1), when relatively few specimens and characters were used compared to modern standards. Second, formal subspecies names have been applied to birds that vary “from groups of populations barely discernible on the basis of weak divergence in a single

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