

100 YEARS AGO IN THE AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION

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100 Years Ago in The American Ornithologists' Union



The Auk 119(2):585–586, 2002

In 1902, 36 major articles were published in *The Auk* (new series vol. 19, old series vol. 27), as well as “The Report of the Committee on the Protection of North American Birds” (19:31–33), “Results of Special Protection to Gulls and Terns Obtained through the Thayer Fund” (19:34–63), and the report of the 19th Congress held in 1901. No memorials of prominent members were published during that year.

A number of long articles were published in installments, such as A. C. Bent’s “Nesting Habits of the North Dakota Anatidae,” which started in volume 18 and concluded with parts two and three in volume 19. Two articles dealt with hybrid swallows (Barn [*Hirundo rustica*] × Cliff [*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*], 18:73–74; and Cliff × Tree [*Tachycineta bicolor*], 18:392–394) and one with a bone of the Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) found in a shell midden in Florida (18:255–258). Even the author, O. P. Hay, doubted that Great Auks actually occurred as far south as Florida with any regularity, but subsequently bones of more northern marine species, including Great Auks, were found in Florida, dated to about 1,000 and 3,000 years ago (Weigel 1958, Hamon 1959, Brodkorb 1960). In a final little spin to those findings, Brodkorb (1960) speculated that it must have been cooler in Florida during those two periods, allowing northern species to range further south. Actually, we now know that 1,000 years ago corresponded with the peak of the Medieval Warm Period.

Two important historical accounts occurred in this issue. In the first, Henry B. Bigelow reported results of the Brown-Harvard Expedition of 1900 to the northeastern coast of Labrador (19:24–30). Although no dates are given, it would appear that the trip took place in July through maybe early October. “Burgomasters” (*Larus hyperboreus*) were common and he reported seeing five Eskimo Curlews (*Numenius borealis*). The local people reported that Eskimo Curlews were still common until eight years previously (1892), after which they all but disappeared. In the second report, John W. Daniel, Jr., presents the summer birds of the Great Dismal Swamp (19:15–18). Several interesting tidbits of information can be found in that report, including the great abundance of Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*) nesting in the trunks of hollow bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). The most common breeding species in the swamp 100 years ago was the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*).

But, by far, the topic discussed most often in this volume was birds on islands. This included lists and notes of birds seen on Long Island, New York (19:145–148); Carriacou Island of the coast of Grenada (19:237–245; 343–348); Margarita Island of the coast of Venezuela (19:258–266), and “Porto Rico” (19:356–366). Also included are studies of individual species on islands, including H. W. Henshaw’s study of the Elepaio (*Chasiempis sandwichensis*) in Hawaii and W. E. Saunders’ report on the breeding of Ipswich Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis princeps*) on Sable Island off the coast of Nova Scotia.

The most important paper, however, was Robert E. Snodgrass’ report on “The Relationship of the Food to the Size of the Bill in the Galapagos Genus *Geospiza*” (19:367–381). Although exact information is not given, the author apparently spent seven months in the Galapagos Islands from December 1898 to June 1899, collecting finches, which at that time were thought to consist of four genera and at least 34 species. They secured stomachs from 209 specimens of *Geospiza* and from a number of mockingbirds. In what may be the first use of operational taxonomic units (OTUs; Vandemeer 1972), he gave each kind of seed found in the stomachs a number and presented figures of the seeds, stating that names of plants were unimportant. On the basis of his finding, Snodgrass examined the relationship between seed size and bill morphology, reaching the following conclusions: (1) foods of *Geospiza* differ from those of mockingbirds, (2) the same species on different islands feed on different seeds, (3) different species on the same island feed on the same kinds of seeds, (4) different species on different islands may feed on the same kinds of seeds, (5) different species at the same or different island may feed on different seeds, and (6) small-billed birds eat small seeds and large-billed birds eat both small and large seeds. Snodgrass concluded that “there is no correlation between the food and the size and shape of the bill” (his emphasis), which, of course, is not entirely true. In the beginning of the article, he prophetically states, “The results are somewhat conflicting. In any case one would require a great amount of evidence to come to any definite conclusions.” We now know, through the work of the Rosemary and Peter Grant and co-workers, that the relationship between bill size and seed size is critical to the survival of *Geospiza* (summarized by Weiner 1994—a book that is well suited for general biology or ecology students).

Several articles proposed new subspecies, and the strangest of these is William Brewster's Red-legged Black Duck (*Anas obscura rubripes*; 19:183–188). Brewster started his paper by stating, "It is a matter of common belief among our more intelligent and observing wild-fowl gunners that two kinds of Black Ducks are found in New England. . . ." and went on to describe a new subspecies with bright red legs and a yellow bill, found mostly during fall in New England. Of course, we now know that Brewster was describing (male) adults in breeding plumage as a new subspecies. He admits that he had not collected any local birds during the breeding season, as he "cared not to incur the odium of breaking the game laws. . . ." but he had shot a few Black Ducks in late August and many in September and the red-legged birds did not appear until late September, leading him to speculate further that the red-legged form must breed somewhere north of New England, probably in eastern Canada.

In 1908, the AOU Committee reported in the Fourteenth Supplement to the AOU Check-list (25:343–399) that *Anas obscura* was preoccupied and that the Black Duck was now to be *Anas rubripes* Brewster. Noting some concern about the validity of the Red-legged Black Duck, they declared the subspecies "cancelled" and "eliminated." In what surely is one of the most entertaining articles ever published in *The Auk*, Brewster (1909) likens the situation to feeling like "[an] eel . . . being skinned alive . . .". He claims that when questioned about the fate of the Red-legged Black Duck, the chair of the committee (J. A. Allen) responded that they were now waiting for Brewster to describe the Green-legged Black Duck as the alternative. Believing that *A. rubripes* should be the name for the Red-legged Black Duck, Brewster (1909) proposes *A. r. tristis* to represent the rest of the Black Ducks ("tristis . . . to commemorate the sad fate it has been called upon to suffer at the hands of authorities on nomenclature"). What a conundrum—the species is now described as a subspe-

cies and a subspecies is now elevated to species status. Not to worry, insists Brewster, because some of us believe in the rules of the Code. "Canon XXIX of the Code provides that when a species is separated into subspecies . . . the earliest name applied to any form of the group shall be the specific names of the whole group" (Brewster 1909:177). Having just proposed a new subspecies for the all non-Red-legged Black Ducks in the previous paragraph, Brewster (1909) proclaims that the only two choices for the name of Black Duck remain: *rubripes* and *tristis*. Because *rubripes* was proposed in 1902 and *tristis* in 1909, he concludes that by the rules of nomenclature, the scientific name of the Black Duck now must be *Anas rubripes* Brewster, which, of course, is exactly the name that the AOU Committee had given it the previous year. He goes on to say that ordinarily, suggesting the name for the Black Duck would have been "just cause for honest pride," but now it is an "empty honor, in which I take no satisfaction." He finishes with a dismissal of Charles W. Townsend's (correct) claim (1905) that "for the sake of argument, *rubripes* is merely the adult male [Black Duck]."

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