



Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

EDITED BY R. TODD ENGSTROM

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

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The Feathery Tribe: Robert Ridgway and the Modern Study of Birds.—Daniel Lewis. 2012. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. xxi + 336 pp., 20 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN 9780300183450. Hardcover, \$45.—This is an extremely well-researched history of the development of ornithology in the last quarter of the 19th century and the early 20th century, particularly in North America, under the influence of Darwinian evolution. As the author states in the preface:

The publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871 gave a pair of combination punches to the body of science that had for centuries been commingled with religious explanations and sentiment.

Lewis treats this development of ornithology in the wake of Darwin using three “markers” or influences that are important in the development and practice of ornithology and the study of the natural world: (1) the creation of meaningful classification systems, (2) the related issues of accountability and authority (with God and the Bible having reduced authority), and (3) the increasing technical nature of the language used in science. Lewis uses these ideas during his discussion of such things as the rise of a professional class of ornithologists and their complex relationships with the amateurs, what distinguished professionals from amateurs, and the rise of professional organizations. In all of this, Lewis uses the life of Robert Ridgway as a focus of the history. Ridgway, as the first curator of birds at the powerful and influential Smithsonian Institution and a prolific author, played an important role in the changes that occurred in ornithology in this period. Perhaps two dozen or so men, the “feathery tribe,” led the way in the professionalism of ornithology, but Lewis argues that because of his position as curator of birds at the Smithsonian, Ridgway played the greatest role. As Lewis states, again in the preface: “His influence was enormous, and his story is overdue.”

The bulk of the book consists of seven chapters, followed by an appendix of Ridgway's published work from 1869 to 1929, twenty-four pages of end notes, a bibliography, and an index. The first chapter, “Robert Ridgway: The Making of a Bird Man,” traces Ridgway, who was born on 2 July 1850, from his early years in

Mount Carmel, Illinois, including his correspondence with Spencer Fullerton Baird at the Smithsonian, who recognized the young man's scientific and artistic talents. Baird offered him a position in 1867 as zoologist on the Fortieth Parallel Survey, led by Clarence King, a survey that occupied the young Ridgway for three years. Chapter 2 deals with Ridgway's career at the Smithsonian, his rise to the position of curator, and the development of a reputation as an authority on birds: “At the Smithsonian, Ridgway was the undisputed king of birds—and for the American public, the Smithsonian was the undisputed national palace of science” (p. 65). In chapter 3, Lewis traces the founding, in 1873, of the first organization devoted to birds, the Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the establishment of the club's *Bulletin* in 1876, the first publication in North America devoted exclusively to birds. This was followed by the founding, in 1883, of a North American organization, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), which in many respects was an outgrowth of the NOC. The president of the NOC, William Brewster, and the editor of the NOC *Bulletin*, J. A. Allen, were major players in the founding of the AOU. Allen became its first president, and the *Bulletin* became *The Auk*, with Allen as its editor. Ridgway was elected a vice-president and associate editor of *The Auk*. Both the *Bulletin* and *The Auk* were conspicuous in their lack of sentiment or reference to the role of the Creator. In an interesting subplot, Lewis describes the nagging illnesses of such notables as Elliott Coues, Ridgway, and Allen, and argues that they resulted from arsenic poisoning. Lewis also considers the turmoil between the amateurs and professionals that swirled around the newly founded AOU. In his discussion of the early years of *The Auk*, he documents the controversy surrounding the choice of the name of the new journal, and some of the hostilities and jealousies among the associate editors. Chapter 4 concerns bird study collections and how the value of collections changed after Darwin. Long series of specimens of species became important with a growing emphasis on subspecific and regional variation within species. Lewis chronicles the late-19th-century exploration that led to the description of new species and the professional collectors who were increasingly employed by museums and wealthy individuals. Chapter 5,

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“Nomenclatural Struggles, Checklists, and Codes” suggests that “Ridgway stood at the very top of the messy, challenging, and crucial taxonomic heap... [and] described far more new genera, species, and subspecies of American birds than any other ornithologist” (p. 146). The AOU was instrumental in establishing a unifying set of bird names for American birds, and Ridgway was on the committee that was responsible for this. In 1886, the AOU published its first check-list, *The Code of Nomenclature and Check-list of North American Birds*. The chapter also deals with the Americans embracing trinomial nomenclature while Europeans in general rejected the idea. The chapter contains, as do all the chapters, some pithy quotes that provide insight into the very personal interactions that went with the growing pains of the AOU. For example, Coues wished to be the official representative of the AOU in talks with British ornithologists during a visit to Great Britain but was rebuffed by a usually accommodating William Brewster in a letter to Allen:

Having little, if any, faith left in Dr. Coues' good faith, tact, judgment, and discretion I cannot believe it either wise or safe to empower him to act as a formal emissary of the A.O.U. during his proposed visit to England. (p. 176)

Chapter 6, “Publications about Birds,” presents a general discussion of journal papers and priority and then discusses Ridgway's publications and his illustrations, including his magnum opus *The Birds of North and Middle America*, published by the Smithsonian in eight volumes between 1901 and Ridgway's death in 1929, with the final three volumes completed by Herbert Friedman and published in 1941, 1946, and 1950. The final chapter deals with Ridgway's standardizing the descriptions of the colors of birds and his color dictionaries. In the text and in the epilogue, Lewis suggests that Ridgway, with his singular focus on anatomy, taxonomy, and classification, had become out of step with an ornithology that was moving toward the study of behavior and the living bird and the conception that amateurs could make significant contributions to the science of ornithology.

Lewis weaves the story of Robert Ridgway and his ornithological career expertly through the historical context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the emergence of modern ornithology. The book is full of interesting historical tidbits. For example, it recounts the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899, which brought together a rich assortment of conservation and ornithological bright lights, including, in addition to Ridgway, such dignitaries as Louis Agassiz Fuertes, John Muir, John Burroughs, Daniel Elliot, A. K. Fisher, C. Hart Merriam, and George Bird Grinnell. The book is well written, well researched, and includes frequent quotes from the correspondence of the major players, which adds immeasurably to the effectiveness of the story. Lewis infuses his writing with vivid statements. For example:

Discussing nomenclature and taxonomy...doesn't really qualify as good cocktail party conversation. Broach the subject, and civilians are quickly gripped by a look of panic. Their eyes, if they haven't already rolled far back into their skulls, begin darting furtively around the room in a desperate dance as they attempt to break free of the conversational shackles in which they have been placed. (p. 145)

This book belongs in every academic and museum library and should appeal to anyone with an interest in the historical roots of modern ornithology.—WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR., *Professor Emeritus, Boston University, 23 Knollwood Drive, East Falmouth, Massachusetts 02536, USA. E-mail: wedavis11@gmail.com.*

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Interspecific Competition in Birds.—André A. Dhondt. 2012. Oxford Avian Biology Series (Book 2). Oxford University Press, New York. 296 pp., 59 text figures. ISBN 9780199589029. Paperback, \$59.99.—This book is a rich source of inspiration for anyone interested in competition and how the presence of competitors is manifested in the daily life of birds. It is a timely and welcome integration of knowledge on several levels of organization—community, population, and individual. For ecologists, competition has become something of a Holy Grail, eagerly sought but evasive. It is attributed a key role in both evolutionary theory and population dynamics. Yet the role of competition remains controversial, and its mode of operation is rather abstract when deduced from limiting similarity or niche separation. As manifestations of competition, such patterns reflect the “ghost of selection past” rather than illustrating its mechanisms in operation. Here this new book by André Dhondt comes to our aid, giving competition a more concrete form in showing how individuals monitor daily threats to survival and their prospects of reproduction. The book pulls together a wealth of field data demonstrating how the presence of competitors affects the individual's behavior. The data span several levels of organization, ranging from density-dependent responses on a population level, to between-individual behavioral interactions, and, in particular, to individual strategies of efficient resource use in a competitive environment.

The book reflects how rich the study of competition of birds in the wild can be—it can include more than linking numbers to population growth. Dhondt lays bare a wealth of between-individual behaviors and individual–resource relations demonstrating responses to resource depletion and how individuals handle their social environment. The reality of competition can, for instance, be read from individual differences in their strategic responses to a dominance-structured society. Individual differences in behavior reflect adaptive responses in habit use, time allocation, and energy storage. Eventual evolutionary consequences of such individual differences are manifested in survival and reproductive success. Population dynamics and adaptive strategies here go hand-in-hand. This book amply demonstrates how competition is more than a mere abstraction with such a multilevel approach, but it also shows how painstaking the quest to unveil the operation of competition in the field can be. The main value of this book lies in the impact of the combined detail of data from an array of meticulous field studies on different organization levels—population,