

Recent Literature.

STEARNS AND COUES'S "NEW ENGLAND BIRD LIFE."* — After many years of waiting we at length have a work on New England birds of which no ornithologist need feel ashamed. Indeed, this goes without saying when it is known that "New England Bird Life" is edited by Dr. Coues. It is a timely little volume and forms so important an addition to the literature of the subject of which it treats that we propose to consider it at some length.

Immediately following the somewhat significant "Editor's Preface" is an "Introduction," which includes exceedingly useful chapters on the classification and structure of birds; the "Preparation of Specimens for Study"; the "Subject of Faunal Areas"; and the "Literature of New England Ornithology." This preliminary portion occupies fifty pages, not one of which can be considered superfluous. The main body of the work comprises two hundred and seventy pages and treats the successive families in order, from the Thrushes through the Crows and Jays, thus embracing the whole order of *Oscines*. It is a pity that so many of our works are similarly incomplete, but in the present case we are assured that Part I is "to be followed as soon as practicable, by a second volume, completing the treatise"; and perhaps it is not too much to hope that nothing will occur to prevent the fulfilment of this promise.

The intended scope of the book is thus trenchantly defined in the Preface: "It is the object of the present volume to go carefully over the whole ground, and to present, in concise and convenient form, an epitome of the Bird-life of New England. The claims of each species to be considered a member of the New England Fauna are critically examined, and not one is admitted upon insufficient evidence of its occurrence within this area; the design being to give a thoroughly reliable list of the Birds, with an account of the leading facts in the life-history of each species. The plan of the work includes brief descriptions of the birds themselves, enabling one to identify any specimen he may have in hand; the local distribution, migration, and relative abundance of every species; together with as much general information respecting their habits as can conveniently be brought within the compass of a hand-book of New England Ornithology."

This plan is fully and consistently followed to the end, never slighted, seldom overstepped. The specific characters are given in the very simplest language but usually with sufficient definiteness to meet all the

* *New England Bird Life*, being a Manual of New England Ornithology, revised and edited from the manuscript of Winfrid A. Stearns, Member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, etc., by Dr. Elliott Coues, U. S. A., Member of the Academy, etc. Part I—*Oscines*. Boston, Lee and Shepard, Publishers. New York, Charles T. Dillingham, 1881, 8vo. pp. 324, numerous woodcuts.

requirements of that class of readers for whom they are presumably intended, while the biographical passages, although containing little that is new, are always apt and interesting. The references to previous records, as might be expected, form a marked feature; in the case of the more important species, especially, they are so accurately collated, so dispassionately weighed, and so conveniently grouped that they cannot fail to render the work of the utmost value to even the most advanced student of the subject. There are no new features of classification, but it will be noticed that the nomenclature has in most cases been arranged in accordance with some important changes which have been recently proposed. The illustrations are fairly numerous, mainly technical in character, and all taken from Dr. Coues's previous works.

It is, of course, not to be expected that such a book will be entirely free from errors, especially when we consider the fact that its editor (who, it should be stated, announces himself "responsible for the accuracy and completeness of the work") has had little personal experience with New England birds as such. Those which do occur usually affect the breeding distribution of the birds to which they relate. In most cases this is made out with great judgment and in strict accordance with known facts, but where the positive evidence is incomplete there are indications that the editor occasionally gave free scope to his prophetic fancy. This running ahead of the records is a dangerous business, despite Dr. Coues's masterly argument in defence of "logical deductions" and the "logical results of ratiocination." Birds, like many other beings, sometimes take it into their heads to be erratic, and thus disappoint the prophets in various ways. It is not always safe to base a positive general statement on one or two exceptional occurrences, while it is even more hazardous to fill absolute blanks from the analogy furnished by known parallel cases. This may be appropriately demonstrated by considering some of the following quotations from "New England Bird Life."

Turdus pallasi.—"The Hermit Thrush is another bird whose breeding range draws a line between the two principal Faunæ of New England, being restricted in the breeding season to the Canadian Fauna, as the Wood Thrush is to the Alleghanian." In point of fact, the Hermit Thrush breeds regularly in Massachusetts at many places in Essex and Middlesex Counties, and on Cape Cod in abundance. Authenticated nests have been taken at Gloucester, Beverly, and Concord, while in June and July we have heard many males singing near Hyannis, Marston's Mills, and Osterville. Its distribution in the breeding season, so far from being, as is elsewhere stated, closely coincident with that of Swainson's Thrush, is rather to be compared with that of the Olive-sided Flycatcher, which breeds generally and most abundantly throughout the Canadian Fauna; locally and sparingly, but still regularly, in the Alleghanian, and perhaps occasionally just within the northern boundary of the Carolinian.

Regulus calendula.—The Ruby-crowned Kinglet, given as "one of the many birds which mark the distinction between the Canadian and Alleghanian Faunæ, being apparently limited by the former in its southward

range during the breeding season," has not actually been ascertained to breed in the Canadian Fauna at all. Boardman alone has catalogued it as a rare "summer visitant," but none of the recent investigators have detected it excepting in the migrations. Its southward range in summer is much more likely to prove limited by the Hudsonian than the Canadian Fauna.

Certhia familiaris.—The statement that "the Brown Creeper is resident throughout New England and a common bird in all suitable localities" is perhaps not sufficiently qualified by the reservation that it breeds "chiefly in the Canadian Fauna." The three southern New England States have now been comparatively well explored, and the record by Mr. Allen of a nest seen at Springfield, and another by Dr. Brewer of one found near Taunton, with Mr. Merriam's simple statement that it "breeds" in Connecticut, are all the reliable data that we have for attributing it to the Alleghanian Fauna of New England. Opposed to this is the great mass of negative testimony on the part of numerous local observers who have never found the bird in summer at all. While it must be admitted that there is something to be said on both sides of the question, we cannot at present believe that the breeding of the Creeper south of the Canadian Fauna is otherwise than a rare and exceptional occurrence.

Anthus ludovicianus.—"The manner of the Titlark's presence in New England" is decidedly not "similar to that of the Shore Lark" for, as Mr. Purdie has insisted (Bull. N. O. C., Vol. I, p. 73, Sept. 1876 and II, p. 17, Jan. 1877), the former normally occurs only as a spring and fall migrant, while the Shore Lark regularly winters. Dr. Brewer is the sole authority for the wintering of the Titlark in Massachusetts, and if there was no mistake about the instances he records they were unquestionably exceptional. The negative evidence in this case is unusually conclusive. It would not be difficult to produce a dozen reliable persons who have had many years' experience in winter collecting along the Massachusetts coast who yet have never seen a Titlark there after November. Our own experience is that the species arrives from the north about the middle of September, is at the height of its abundance during the latter part of that month and the first half of October, and wholly disappears before the close of November to reappear in April, when it is less frequently seen and apparently more irregular in its movements.

Dendroica caerulescens.—Despite the fact that three identified nests of the Black-throated Blue Warbler have been found in Connecticut, "its local distribution in New England" cannot fairly be considered as "coincident" with that of *Dendroica virens*. The latter breeds regularly throughout the whole of New England and is, if anything, rather commoner in summer in the pine woods of Eastern Massachusetts than among the spruces and firs of the more northern States, while the Black-throated Blue Warbler is, to say the least, mainly confined to the Canadian Fauna. The statement that "it has been observed in summer in Massachusetts" presumably relates to Allen's record (Birds of Springfield, p. 62) of its being "found in the breeding season on Mt. Holyoke (C. W. Bennett)

and along the ridges in the western part of the State (B. Horsford).” But these elevated places are both outlying spurs of the *Canadian* region and many strictly *Canadian* species, such as the Black Snowbird, regularly breed there. The occurrence of nests at Eastford, Connecticut, is certainly hard to understand, but the explanation may probably be found in some peculiar feature of the locality where they were taken. At all events there are at present no sufficient reasons for regarding them as other than exceptional examples.

Syrus naevius.—In the “Birds of the Colorado Valley” (p. 301) Dr. Coues asserted that the Northern Water Thrush “breeds in the greater part if not the whole of its North American range,” and in the present work this view is substantially reiterated in the following terms: “Being a species of the widest distribution in North America, the Water Thrush is found in all suitable situations in New England, where it is a summer resident, and more or less abundant according to circumstances in no way connected with geographical or faunal areas.” Waiving for the present any discussion of the question at large, we will confine ourselves to a consideration of the character of the bird’s presence in New England. Upon examining the records it appears that no identified nest has ever been found south of the limits of the *Canadian Fauna*. In the “Catalogue of the Birds of Springfield” Mr. Allen stated that “apparently a few breed here,” but as he has reversed this opinion in his later “List of the Birds of Massachusetts,” the presumption is that there was some mistake about the earlier observations. Mr. Merriam surmises that “possibly a few occasionally remain and breed in Connecticut.” All the other authors (save Minot, whose testimony on questions of this kind is inadmissible) agree in considering the Water Thrush as a spring and fall migrant in the three southern New England States. Going by the records alone, Dr. Coues will find it difficult to maintain his position, while if the unwritten testimony on the subject were produced we fancy that it would go very strongly against his view of the case. Certainly there are no present grounds for believing that the Northern Water Thrush breeds at all in New England south of the *Canadian Fauna*.

Collurio borealis.—The breeding of the Northern Shrike anywhere south of the Fur Countries is at present so much a matter of uncertainty, owing to the recently developed fact that the Loggerhead has frequently come in where he did not belong and wilfully muddled the records, that we cannot but think that Dr. Coues would have been wiser had he avoided taking any positive stand in this much disputed question. The comparison of its presence with that of the Black Snowbird, is manifestly inappropriate, while the prophecy that “it will doubtless be found to breed in the highest parts of Massachusetts” can scarcely be warranted by any of the known facts.

Taken for all in all, however, “New England Bird Life” is remarkably free from errors of every kind: we doubt if there is another outsider who could have come among us and done so well, but it must not be overlooked that Mr. Purdie helped “in collating and sifting the scattered

records," an assistance which was a practical guarantee against any very gross errors.

To say that the book is exceedingly well-written would be doing it scant justice. Dr. Coues's brilliant talents in this respect are already well known, but we have perhaps never had so striking a proof of them as is afforded by the present volume. The work has been done so thoroughly that in point of completeness it is almost perfect; so consistently that but few points are open to criticism; so concisely that one hundred and thirty-eight species are treated in two hundred and seventy octavo pages. And the arrangement of the whole is masterly. Gracefully turned descriptive passages and sparkling bits of commentary everywhere enliven the substructure of fact, as the brighter colors of an old piece of tapestry set off its more sombre background. Those who are familiar with such works as the "Birds of the North-west" and "Birds of the Colorado Valley" will have no difficulty in judging for themselves to what extent the editor acted on the author's permission "in revising, and to some extent re-writing" the latter's notes for publication.

There is, however, one feature which we cannot approve, and which will doubtless be regretted by all who are familiar with the history of the case on which it bears. We allude to the numerous comments on the records left by a late well-known ornithologist. The strictures themselves are in many, perhaps most, cases just, but they are characterized by a certain bitterness of tone which implies a lack of respect for the memory of an opponent who is no longer able to speak in his own defence.

It remains to make some reference to the ostensible author of the work. Simply, then, Mr. Stearns may be congratulated on his wise choice of an editor.—W. B.

CORY'S BEAUTIFUL AND CURIOUS BIRDS. — Part III of Mr. Cory's work* treats of *Menura superba*, the, well known Australian Lyre Bird; *Diphylloides respublica*, a peculiar Bird of Paradise found on Batarra and the Waigiou Islands in the Malay Archipelago; and the Ruff (*Machetes pugnax*). The latter is of interest to American ornithologists as an occasional straggler from Europe, where, as in Asia and Africa, it is widely distributed and generally known, and is especially noteworthy for its pugnacious disposition and remarkable plumage.

The plates in the present number fully sustain the high degree of excellence which characterized those of the earlier ones. That of the Lyre Bird is notably fine; the coloring is rich and soft, while the wonderful details of the lyre-shaped tail are executed with great clearness and delicacy. The iridescent hues of the Bird of Paradise are also well managed. The work is well worthy of the patronage of those who may desire excellent life-size figures of a series of exceptionally remarkable forms of bird-life, with the accompaniment of appropriate text.—J. A. A.

* See this Bulletin, Vol. V, p. 236 and Vol. VI, p. 111.

MINOT'S "LAND AND GAME BIRDS OF NEW ENGLAND."—A stricture, in the July Bulletin (Vol. VI, p. 145), on my work convinces me the more firmly that ornithologically I am a heretic. Being a sincere heretic, and being thus impugned, I wish to avow my creed, and to vindicate my methods. As to the particular point assailed, I submit that the presentation of evidence, probabilities, and judgment, is not a statement of inference as fact, and, moreover, that no statement ought utterly to be condemned before the evidence has been either demanded or examined.

I most willingly confess that, after five years' more experience and judgment, there is much in my "Birds of New England" that I would gladly alter; but my theories of work I have no reason to change. To the servant of science the gun is often indispensable, not only for satisfying the judgment of others, but for confirming one's own observation; but, on the other hand, I believe that ordinarily it far too often takes the place of the naturalist's faculties and senses, and that too often the animal love of sport or killing, and the human love of material acquisition, are unconsciously his motives. It is astonishing how many persons are dependent for their sight quite as much upon their fingers as their eyes, and to how many obtuse and illogical minds (I make no personal reference whatsoever) circumstantial evidence is of no value.* In this common demand for tangibility, there seems to me a want of perception and sentiment, of ideality and liberality. This may sound sentimental and sententious; but I know not how better to express a strong feeling upon which much of my practical work has been based. If the notes and eggs that I can produce, though unaccompanied by a dried skin, are not what I claim them to be, I defy any one on earth to tell me what they are. As for wilful dishonesty, the gun surely is no protection against that.

As arguments from analogy are usually misleading, I prefer suggestions by comparison. What is evidence? If A testifies to seeing B at a certain time and place, is his evidence to be questioned simply because he cannot now produce B in court? Is his evidence of no value, that a certain builder built a certain house, because he cannot now produce the body of that architect for identification? If A can reproduce exactly B's peculiar voice and intonation, can it reasonably be questioned whether he has ever known him? Is not the question properly: is this witness of accurate observation, competent judgment, truthful memory and honest purpose? or, on the other hand, if he is a perjurer, is his evidence to be trusted, no matter what its nature?

* "I hold that logical deduction from certain known facts may be a positive and decisive kind of knowledge; and that the mental processes concerned are strictly scientific." . . . I "feel little respect for a frame of mind that prefers to take 'ten to one' chances of blundering empirically as against logical results of ratiocination." (Dr. Coues, pp. 79-80, in Stearns's "New England Bird Life," Part I.) These remarks seem fairly correspondent in spirit, if not in letter, to the feelings expressed above. I may here add that the value of Mr. Stearns's new work renders that of his predecessors of much less account.—H. D. M.

It is my earnest hope and desire that my declaration may not provoke further controversy or correspondence.—HENRY D. MINOT.

[Mr. Minot has expressed his peculiar views with such naïveté, that his letter may, in a general way, be taken as its own answer. It would be gratuitous at this late day to essay any elaborate defence of the established systems of work which he rejects, but there are certain important statements resting on his authority, which it is fitting to reconsider in the light of their author's avowed methods and principles. Many of our readers will remember the very complimentary notice of the "Land and Game Birds of New England" which appeared in a former volume of this Bulletin: the high authority from which it emanated undoubtedly gave it much weight and possibly silenced the other critics; at least, the book has never been reviewed on its merits, and things which should have been severely censured, have passed nearly unchallenged up to the present time. The precedent is too dangerous to be allowed to stand.

A few prominent examples will suffice to point the moral of what I have to say.

In the "Land and Game Birds" Mr. Minot speaks of finding near Boston such nests as the Northern Water Thrush's, the Cape May Warbler's, the Blackburnian Warbler's, the Short-eared Owl's and the Pigeon Hawk's. Now it might be reasonably supposed that the importance of any one of these discoveries would have called for the very strictest identification. Yet the text furnishes no assurance of this. On the contrary, the author does not even tell us that the birds were *seen* and in no instance is any evidence whatever, direct or circumstantial, advanced in support of their assumed identity. The descriptions of the nests and eggs, too, are so brief and general that they give little satisfaction. It may well be doubted if any of our older ornithologists would care to risk his reputation on such unsupported but entirely positive statements. Of course the *sincerity* of Mr. Minot's convictions is not called in question; but the school boy whose collection embraces alleged eggs of every species of Sparrow that breeds from Maine to Florida is equally sincere, though the parentage of most of his specimens may generally be safely referred to a few of the common kinds. The parallel may seem a harsh one, but the basis of identification is essentially the same in the two cases: *viz.*, *individual opinion*.

Now we fancy that there are many persons besides Mr. Minot whose feelings often revolt at the thought of killing a harmless and confiding little bird. But if the importance of the case renders this necessary no one ought to hesitate. A bird's life should count as nothing against the verification of a rare nest or the establishment of a new fact. A sombre-plumaged Sparrow cannot always be recognized as it skulks through the undergrowth, or the females of many of our Warblers separated with certainty while sitting half-buried in their nests or sitting among the foliage. The collector may satisfy himself, especially if his imagination is allowed to supply some of the blanks, but he must not expect to satisfy others who know by experience the difficulties of such cases. If the nest in question is common and well known, especially if the eggs are in them—

selves diagnostic of the species, it is well enough to be content with a good sight at the birds and a careful record of the position and surroundings. Even if an occasional mistake be made in this way there is little harm done. But he who would chronicle the occurrence of a rare nest in a region where the bird is not known to breed, must see to it that his chain of evidence is absolutely complete. And no such evidence *can* be complete without the capture and proper identification of at least one of the parent birds. Circumstances, it is true, will sometimes render such an identification impossible, despite the utmost efforts on the part of the collector. A bird may be shot at and missed, or lost among the vegetation after it has fallen. In cases of this kind the observer's impressions are always entitled to attention, provided the facts on which they are based are frankly and fully given. The record then stands open to the scrutiny of all and can be judged on its merits, while its acceptance or rejection will depend largely on the reputation which the writer bears for accuracy and experience in such matters. The author who disregards these cardinal principles must of necessity defy the opinions of those who accept them, and he should expect his work to be judged accordingly.

But the most conspicuous act of daring remains to be mentioned. On page 290 of the "Land and Game Birds" the author describes a species of *Empidonax*—a new genus even was suggested, "to be called *Muscacipiter*," basing his diagnosis on a bird which *he saw flying about in the shrubbery of his father's place near Boston.*

This last example needs no comment. We trust it is one of the things that Mr. Minot would now "gladly alter": but it stands prominent among the fruits of that "system of work" which he sees "no reason to change" and is perhaps no more than an extreme example of the operaglass method of identification. If such work is to be recognized—and toleration is in some sense recognition—the gun may indeed be dispensed with and rare nests and new birds described *ad libitum* without the shedding of more blood. But if ornithology is to continue to hold a place among the sciences the leaders must see to it that such dangerous heresy is promptly discountenanced. The quotation from Dr. Coues in the foot-note to Mr. Minot's communication has absolutely no bearing, either direct or indirect, on the points here at issue. It originally appears in connection with some general remarks affecting the philosophic composition of faunæ and the methods followed in the preparation of certain lists of New England birds. Dr. Coues's published sentiments regarding the proper identification of important *specimens* are too well known to need repetition, but any one who wishes to satisfy himself on this point will find some pertinent remarks on page 101 of "Field Ornithology" and on page 33 of "New England Bird Life."

In conclusion I beg to assure Mr. Minot that the above remarks are prompted by no ill-feeling and—excepting in so far as an author is to be held responsible for his printed utterances—are intended to have no personal application. Nor would I be understood as wholly condemning the "Land and Game Birds of New England." On the contrary, leaving

out the faulty portions, which in nearly all cases relate to abstract points similar to those just cited, the pages bear the impress of accurate observation and original thought, while no one who loves the out-door side of Nature can fail to sympathize with the author's sentiment or to be impressed by the truth and beauty of many of his passages. It is a pity that one who writes so delightfully will mar his work by a persistent adhesion to false principles.—WILLIAM BREWSTER.]

General Notes.

THE GOLDEN-CRESTED WREN BREEDING IN THE COLORADO VALLEY.— July 1, at an elevation of 11,500 feet, I shot an adult Golden-crested Wren (*Regulus satrapa*). Its presence made its nesting here almost a certainty, but all doubts were set at rest by the capture of a young bird just from the nest, in another part of the county, at 11,000 feet on July 25. Several others were heard and seen. I judge it is not uncommon, but from the fact of its ordinary call-notes being so deceptively similar to the Creeper's notes, it is easily passed by. So far as I know it seems to range a little above the bulk of the Ruby-crowns. — FRANK M. DREW, *Howardsville, San Juan County, Col.*

NOTES ON THE WINTER WREN (*Anorthura troglodytes hyemalis*).— My chance acquaintance with a chapter in the life-history of this species, during a recent visit to Grand Manan, N.B., may not be uninteresting to the readers of the Bulletin. I was informed by Mr. S. F. Cheney that its occurrence in that locality, where it is called the Spruce Wren, is not common. He has seen an occasional pair in previous years, principally in the winter season, and noted its prolonged sweet song, but he had never met with their nest, supposing always that it was placed on the ground in hollow logs. During the breeding season the dense spruce swamps are its home and in such a situation, upon one of the outlying islands near Grand Manan, I found its snugly hidden nest. At that time no owner appeared and I was ignorant of the value of my prize, but visiting the locality again on June 2, and carefully approaching to avoid disturbing its occupant, if any, to a distance of scarce five feet, I saw, cautiously thrust out from the mass of green moss, a brown little head, followed in a moment by the unmistakable form of the Winter Wren. It displayed scarce any fear, alighting only three or four feet from me, jerking its tail forward over its back and scolding vehemently, somewhat in the manner of our common House Wren. After watching it for several minutes, in my anxiety to procure it, I proceeded to back