

## RECENT LITERATURE.

**Bent's 'Life Histories of North American Diving Birds.'**<sup>1</sup>—For almost ten years Mr Bent has been engaged in gathering materials for a work on the life histories of North American birds, under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution. It was the general impression, and the author's intention at the outset, that the splendid work that the late Major Bendire left unfinished would be carried on to completion. It comes therefore as a distinct surprise to those who were looking forward to another of the portly quartos, on the lines of the two that Bendire published, to find in its stead a modest octavo volume.

Even a cursory examination of the work, however, demonstrates that the change of plan was advisable. The smaller volume is much more easily handled and therefore more practical and generally useful, while the half-tone illustrations with which it abounds are better adapted to the smaller size. Indeed, the only point in which the quarto volume had any advantage was in portraying the eggs, which have, of course, to be of natural size, and appear somewhat crowded on the smaller plates. Furthermore, as we compare the works of Bent and Bendire we realize at once that the interval of twenty-five years that has passed since the last volume of the latter appeared has made it desirable that the life histories there presented be rewritten, in the light of present-day information, so that an entirely new work on a new plan is inevitable.

As we read Mr. Bent's pages we fail to see how his plan could have been improved upon. He divides his subject matter into two main sections, 'Habits' and 'Distribution,' the former with the subheadings: courtship, nesting, eggs, young, plumage, food, behavior, winter, and an introductory paragraph that might well be termed habitat; while under the second heading come: breeding range, winter range, spring migration, fall migration, casual records, and egg dates. Mr. Bent has had the cooperation of about 150 ornithologists in gathering the material upon which his life histories are based, and he has not hesitated also to draw upon the most reliable published accounts when first-hand information was not obtainable. With the card index of the U. S. Biological Survey at his disposal he was able to consult practically every work on North American birds, and due credit is given for every quotation, but we should much prefer foot notes to the method so common among university biologists, and which Mr. Bent has adopted, of citing the year of publication after the author's name and leaving the reader to find the rest in the bibliography at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Life Histories of North American [Diving Birds]. Order Pygipodes. [By] Arthur Cleveland Bent [of Taunton, Massachusetts. [Washington, [Government Printing Office. [1919. [Smithsonian Institution. [United States National Museum. [Bulletin 107. [pp. i-ix + 1-245, pl. 1-55.

volume. This, however, is a mere matter of detail and does not affect the value of Mr. Bent's life histories which we regard as the most accurate and well-balanced accounts that have yet appeared of the species treated — concise and easy to consult and at the same time very readable and entertaining.

Considering a few of the details, we find under migration, inclusive dates showing the general time of occurrence in a number of States in various parts of the country. As the author explains, the attempt has been made to show only the general movements of the species, more detail in a work of this sort being manifestly impossible. The breeding and winter ranges are sketched out with much more detail and have the advantage of having been read and revised by Mr. J. H. Fleming. In stating the measurements of eggs a rather novel method has been employed. The average of a large number of specimens is given first, followed by the dimensions of the four eggs which exhibit the extremes of length and breadth. One editorial practise which is adopted throughout the work, but with which we imagine the author had nothing to do, is that of printing the English names of the species entirely in lower case. This may be all right in general literature, where the practise originated, but in a work on birds there is no more reason for decapitalizing the bird names than those of countries or authors. Next thing we know another practise of the literary magazines, that of writing generic names with a small initial letter, will be forced upon us.

The illustrations of Mr. Bent's work deserve special mention. There are 43 half-tone plates from photographs, usually two views to a plate, illustrating the nest, habitat, and often the young or adult birds. Most of the photographs are published for the first time, but there is one view of a colony of Murres which appeared previously in 'The Auk' for 1917. In the latter place it is said to have been taken on Outer Island, Canadian Labrador, while now the locality is given as Cape Whittle, Quebec. Both happen to be correct, and those who think that bird nomenclature is the only kind that is subject to change and deplore the fact, may take heart. There are also 12 excellent plates of eggs in colors, one or more eggs of each species being shown, except the Great Auk, the egg of which forms the frontispiece to the volume. These are photographs of the eggs themselves reproduced by the three color process and are wonderful examples of this kind of illustration. Their appearance could, however, have been much improved by arranging all the figures in the same position, instead of vertical, horizontal, right side up and upside down, as has been done.

As the title of the work shows, this volume covers only the Grebes, Loons, and Auks — thirty-six species and subspecies in all. Anyone familiar with the meager accounts that we have heretofore had of many of these species and the remoteness of their breeding areas will appreciate the magnitude of Mr. Bent's task in preparing such adequate sketches as he has presented and will realize that he and his assistant, Mr. F. Seymour Hersey, have had to go far afield to gather the necessary material, while the

aid of numerous explorers of the far north has had to be sought to secure the series of photographs which has been here reproduced. Messrs. Mac-Millan and Ekblaw, of the American Museum's Crocker Land Expedition, were especially generous in this connection.

We have no doubt that while gathering the material presented in this volume Mr. Bent has also secured the bulk of the information necessary for the treatment of many other groups, and we trust that other 'Life Histories' will follow at frequent intervals.

It is obviously the intention of the U. S. National Museum authorities to issue each set of 'Life Histories' as a separate work, since there is no general title and nothing to indicate that other parts will appear, except an incidental reference by the author to "subsequent parts" in the introduction.

Just as Bendire's work was a decided improvement upon the unfinished work of Brewer (1857), so Bent has made a great advance over Bendire, and his 'Life Histories' will, we feel, be for many years the authoritative work on the subject, forming an admirable parallel series to the technical systematic volumes of Ridgway's 'Birds of North and Middle America.'

Let all ornithologists read carefully the last part of Mr. Bent's introduction, and if they have any information on any of the remaining species of water birds that may be of assistance to him, let them send it on at once. And let the author make all speed with his remaining parts. Two works of the kind have been left unfinished, but on the plan he has adopted and with the cooperation that is offered him, he should easily bring these life histories to a completion and establish another milestone in these progress of American ornithology.—W. S.

### Ridgway's 'The Birds of North and Middle America,' Part VIII.<sup>1</sup>—

This long expected part of Mr. Ridgway's great work has at last appeared, having been long held up by war conditions. It is entirely devoted to a consideration of the Charadriiformes or Plover-like birds, in which group

<sup>1</sup> The Birds | of | North and Middle America: | A Descriptive Catalogue | of the | Higher Groups, Genera, Species, and Subspecies of Birds | Known to Occur in North America, from the | Arctic Lands to the Isthmus of Panama, | the West Indies and Other Islands | of the Caribbean Sea, and the | Galapagos Archipelago. | By | Robert Ridgway, | Curator, Division of Birds. | Part VIII. |

Family Jacanidæ — The Jacanas.

Family Edicnemidæ — The Thick-knees.

Family Hæmatopodidæ — The Oyster-catchers.

Family Arenariidæ — The Turnstones.

Family Aphrizidæ — The Surf Birds.

Family Charadriidæ — The Plovers.

Family Scolopaciidæ — The Snipes.

Family Phalaropodidæ — The Phalaropes.

Family Recurvirostridæ — The Avocets and Stilts.

Family Rynchopidæ — The Skimmers.

Family Sternidæ — The Terns.

Family Laridæ — The Gulls.

Family Stercorariidæ — The Skuas.

Family Alcidæ — The Auks. |

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