
100 Years Ago in The Auk



From "*Junco carolinensis* shown to be a subspecies" by Jonathan Dwight, Jr. (1891, *Auk* 8: 290):

"When Mr. William Brewster in 1886 described a new Junco from the mountains of western North Carolina he considered it a subspecies of *J. hyemalis* and called it *Junco hyemalis carolinensis* (*Auk*, II, 1886, p. 248).

"In the Supplement to the A.O.U. Check-List for 1889, this bird was accorded full specific rank. The reason for this never appeared; presumably it was on the ground that until two forms are proved to intergrade they are to be considered distinct species; and further, because no birds have been taken in the region intervening between the Catskill Mountains and North Carolina. [Dwight made the appropriate collections in June 1890, and did the comparative work. He corresponded with Brewster, who admitted that these may be birds distributed along a continuous gradient. Dwight continues.—Ed.] . . . Now it looks as if it must be considered a subspecies again. The trouble seems to originate in the assumption that every newly described bird should stand as a species until proven a variety. Why not just as well expect

every variety to stand as such until proved to be a species? The present instance would furnish, I think, an excellent text for a sermon upon the evils of nomenclature. I only wish, however, to call attention to it, for the case of *carolinensis* is but typical of others that have occurred and are still more likely to occur again. Although Mr. Brewster was quite right in the first place, the same cannot be said of others who in their haste to get ahead of someone else, have burdened our books with endless synonymy, by describing from insufficient material. Would science lose much if time were taken by observers to gather suitable material before describing a bird on the chance of its being new? I do not say that this is entirely practicable, but I do say that when a man thinks that specimens proving doubtful relationships may be obtained in any given locality, he should at least endeavor to obtain them. If time or means fail, it is his misfortune, although the adage "Where there's a will there's a way," still has force."