

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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To the Editor:

This may not fit one of the regular categories of contributions to *AB*, but I think that what I have to say should put a stop to a fair amount of pointless speculation about the controversial word "jizz."

The British birder's term "jizz," which although variously defined, seems by consensus to describe an elusive combination of characteristics that Leahy (for example) sums up neatly as "an amalgam of shape, posture, and behavior" (*The Birdwatcher's Companion* [1982], p. 388). The word has provoked the ire of Roger Tory Peterson (*Birding*, 17[2/3], 1985, p. 37) and Robert Arbib (*American Birds*, 37[5], 1983, p. 127), who may have together destroyed it for American observers and writers about birds. Even so there remains the tantalizing question of origin, and I anticipate future discussions of who may have been responsible for what Arbib acidly calls "an atrocious coinage" and further ingenious guesses about its etymology. I should add here that I have found no clue to the latter in any of the many new and old dictionaries of slang.

Almost certainly the coiner of the term was Thomas Alfred Coward (1867-1933), a prolific writer and respected ornithologist of his day. R. S. R. Fitter, in his admirable, highly accurate, and astonishingly informative *Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds* (rev. ed., 1966, repr. 1977, p. 29), lists the usual qualities

brought together in what "T. A. Coward used to call the 'jizz' of the bird." Fitter's remark has the tone of oral recollection, although the word may appear somewhere in Coward's published work. In his acknowledgments, Fitter lists Coward's *Birds of the British Isles and Their Eggs* (printed 1919, pub. 1920, frequently repr. and with revisions by A. W. Boyd in 1933 and after). Considering Coward's dates, it doesn't seem likely that he was influenced either by gestalt psychology or aircraft recognition techniques, two current lines of speculation on the origin of "jizz."

Curiously enough, not all British ornithologists are acquainted with the word. Philip Burton, a well-known British ornithologist, explains it as "a combination of physical appearance, song or call, flight patterns and behaviour—all of which are clues to what the Americans call the 'gizz' [sic] of the bird. . ." (*Birdlife of Britain*, 1976, p. 9).

I have no doubt that Fitter has put us on the right track to "jizz," and I hope that someone with better library facilities than I have will follow it up, admittedly a tedious job except for the born digger in books. Better yet we may find persons who remember T. A. Coward and can tell us about the word and also about the man who coined it.

Sincerely,  
 Clell Peterson  
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