

ALEXANDER WILSON.

II. THE MYSTERY OF THE SMALL-HEADED FLYCATCHER.

BY FRANK L. BURNS.

Dr. Coues has written, "The existence of any such bird is doubtful. The history of the bird begins with a misunderstanding between Wilson and Audubon, and the whole record from that day to this is a tissue of surmises." In 1872, he writes "There is no reasonable probability that any species of this family inhabiting the Middle States in June, remains

Fig. 4.



Black Oystercatcher (*Hamatopus bachmani*).
A rock chip nest in a depression in the rocks surrounded by
vegetation.
Destruction Island.

to be detected. I have no doubt the bird is a *Dendroica*, and nothing in the description forbids its reference to one of these birds, perhaps *D. pinus* (= *vigorsii*).” Later, 1903, he fur-

ther modifies his views:" Continues to be unknown. * * * There certainly was such a bird, for Wilson figured it, and he never drew upon his imagination; but we do not recognize his plate, nor that of Audubon. The mysterious bird has been claimed for New Jersey, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Kansas. I have long believed it to be the Pine-creeping Warbler." Ridgway evidently is not of Coues' opinion, stating as late as 1902, that "I am unable to satisfactorily dispose of this hypothetical species by reference to any other, the peculiar combination of characters indicated in the original description, * * * being shared by no other bird to my knowledge." Audubon has the following to say in reference to Wilson's undoubtedly erroneous New Jersey records: "All my endeavors to trace it in that section of the country have failed, as have those of my friend Edward Harris, Esq., who is a native of that state, resides there, and is well acquainted with all the birds found in that district. I have never seen it out of Kentucky, and even there it is a very uncommon bird. In Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, or further eastward or southward, in our Atlantic district, I never saw a single individual, not even in museums, private collections, or for sale in bird-stuffer's shops." Brewer remarks: "Audubon throws a doubt as to the correctness of Wilson's statement that they have been found in New Jersey, as no one else has ever met with any there. That may be, however, and Wilson's statement yet be correct. The same line of argument carried out would reject the very existence of the bird itself, as no well authenticated records of its occurring since then can be found. They are at least too doubtful to be received as unquestionable until the genuine bird can be produced." And Baird points out that the mere fact of a bird being no longer found, hardly warrants the conclusion that it never existed.

Audubon believed it bred in lower Kentucky, and Chapman, writing within the present year, is not prepared to say that it does not. "Whatever may have been the original of Wilson's *Muscicapa minuta* there can be no question that no such bird as he describes now nests, as he supposed, in New Jersey.

Of Kentucky, where Audubon secured his specimen, so positive a statement is perhaps not warranted, the recent discovery in that state of the nest of Bachman's Warbler indicating that our knowledge of its bird life is still far from complete."

Fig. 5.



Black Oystercatcher (*Hematopus bachmani*).
A beach nest, the eggs lying among rounded pebbles and fragments
of shells, a piece of driftwood to mark the spot.
Destruction Island.

We are dependant upon the writings of Wilson and Audubon for the little we know of this bird. In all the later attempts toward dissipating the uncertainty enveloping this hypothetical species by field work, a lamentable lack of authentication is evident, and the mystery is made to appear an obvious myth. The records follow:

DATE.	LOCALITY	COLLECTOR OR OBSERVER.	AUTHORITY.	REMARKS.
"Early part of the spring, 1808."	Near Louisville, "Kentucky."	J. J. Audubon.	J. J. Audubon.	"One male shot."
"April 24," 1811.	Near Philadelphia, Penna.	Alexander Wilson.	Alexander Wilson. George Ord.	"One male shot."
"Found them in June."	"Various quarters, particularly in swamps of New Jersey."	Alexander Wilson.	Alexander Wilson.	"Several shot."
About 1830.	"Salem, Mass."	S. Pickering.	Thomas Nuttall.	"Obtained a specimen."
"On the approach of Winter." Between 1830 and 1840.	"Massachusetts."	Thomas Nuttall.	Thomas Nuttall.	"Observed."
"1834." "Fall of 1836."	"Roxbury, Mass."	T. M. Brewer.	J. A. Allen. Dr. T. M. Brewer	"One caught by cat."
About 1838.	"Berkshire Co., Mass."	Dr. Ebenezer Emmons.	W. B. O. Peabody.	"Met with."
Sometime previous to 1839.	"Ipswich, Mass."	Dr. T. M. Brewer.	W. B. O. Peabody.	"Met with."
Previous to 1839.	"Brookline, Mass."	Dr. T. M. Brewer.	W. B. O. Peabody.	"Found dead on door-step."
"June 1, 1850."	Near Racine, "Wisconsin."	P. B. Hay.	P. B. Hay.	"Specimens shot."
About 1874 or 1875.	"Wenham, Mass."	Dr. T. M. Brewer.	Dr. T. M. Brewer.	No comment.

Eight persons, all told, at various times claimed to have observed it in the flesh, and at least ten specimens alleged to have been collected; yet not a single skin is extant! Lawson claimed to have worked from Wilson's specimen, and doubtless Ord would have produced it at the rooms of the American Philosophical Society in 1840, had it been possible to do so. Of Wilson's types, all but the two now in the vaults of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, were unfortunately destroyed many years ago by fire at the Peale Museum.

The original describer introduces his remarks with "This very rare species, the only one I ever met with, is drawn, reduced to half its size, to correspond with the rest of the figures on the same plate." And since writing the description of the type, Wilson adds that he has shot several individuals in various quarters of New Jersey, particularly in swamps. They all appear to be nearly alike in plumage. Having found them in June, there is no doubt of their breeding in that State, and probably in such situations far to the southward; for many of the southern summer birds that rarely visit Pennsylvania, are yet common in the swamps and pine woods of New Jersey. Similarity of soil and situation, of plants and trees, and consequently of fruits, seeds, insects, etc., are doubtless their inducements. The Summer Redbird, Great Carolina Wren, Pine-creeping Warbler, and many others, are rarely seen in Pennsylvania or to the northward though they are common in many parts of West Jersey." Conditions well recognized today.

Singularly enough, Wilson does not mention under the proper heading, of having found this subsequently described Pine-creeping Warbler in other than the pine woods of the Southern States. It is altogether possible that in his eagerness for new material, he failed to save the New Jersey specimens and not at all improbable that they would have all been referable to the Pine Warbler, rather than to our subject to which it bears a superficial resemblance. Audubon gives the impression of having seen a number, though stating that it is an uncommon bird; but this statement may also

be based upon error; at any rate his specimen was not saved. Of him Coues has written: "He loved warmth, color, action; he liked to exaggerate and 'embroider,' and make his page glow like a hummingbird's throat, or like one of his marvelous pictures; he had no genius for accuracy, no taste for dull, dry detail, no care for a specimen after he had drawn it." Pickering's specimen obtained many years ago was doubtless based upon erroneous identification, and Nuttall's claim to have seen the species in Massachusetts on the approach of winter is hardly worthy of serious consideration. Dr. Emmons would have to more than meet with so great a rarity before one is convinced of the correctness of his diagnosis. Hay was very evidently mistaken also, although the possession of the specimens should have warranted a full and positive statement, or correction, at some later date. Dr. Brewer was the most prolific in the matter of records, no less than four being accredited to him. In 1869 in a letter to Dr. Allen, he repudiates all but the Roxbury one. "This is the only one I ever knew or heard of. Ipswich I ignore." And Brewer himself also destroys the authenticity of this in 1874 in the following words: "In the fall of 1836, when the writer resided at Roxbury, a cat brought into the house a small Flycatcher, which was supposed to have been of this species. It was given to Mr. Audubon, who asserted to its correct identification, but afterwards made no mention of it. The presumption, therefore, is that we may have been mistaken." This last record a year later at Wenham, is given without annotation, and as he was well aware of the importance of the specimen and all the particulars appertaining to the same, and yet failed to make good; it has been received without confidence. Coues suggests the probability of some one of the small *Empidonaces* being mistaken for it by the later reporters; and Bonaparte in 1850 actually identified it with *Empidonax flaviventris*!

Audubon, Wilson and Ord, the leading American ornithologists of the early part of the nineteenth century, with everything in their favor excepting absolute, visible proof, claimed to have seen this bird in the flesh, and their evidence has not

been successfully controverted; while Lawson, the foremost ornithological engraver of his time, and one accustomed to, indeed must of necessity, note the minutest details in the various specimens he used in conjunction with the drawings; asserted that he had handled the skin. The combined testimony of those four reputable men, all of them specialists, accustomed to note the slightest difference in specimens, would scarcely warrant the slightest doubt of the existence of a bird answering in the main to the description of Wilson and Audubon. Audubon's figure, however, as we have it, is not from the original drawing and perhaps not even from a copy of it, for he informs us in his *Ornithological Biographies* that "The figure in the plate has been copied from the drawing in the possession of my excellent friend and patroness, Miss Eupemia Glifford." This information has been left out of the text of his later editions. We are not informed of the existence of the original drawing, or whether it was unfortunately destroyed by rats at Henderson with almost his entire collection, and reproduced from memory alone. His description, while to a certain extent supplementary to that of Wilson, yet coincides in many respects to the details as set forth by the latter, the conspicuous white ring surrounding the eye being the chief disagreement; and it is significant that in his *Synopsis*, the Pennsylvania and New Jersey records are accepted, and Wilson's measurements appropriated, without question!

Audubon claimed to have drawn his figure at Louisville, and said "I consider this Flycatcher as among the scarcest of those that visit our middle districts. * * * I have never seen it out of Kentucky, and even there it is a very uncommon bird. * * * I have more than once seen it attracted by an imitation of these notes. * * * The sound is comparatively weak, as is the case with the species above mentioned, it being stronger, however, in the Green Blackcap than in this or the Hooded species. Like these kinds, it follows its prey to some distance at times, whilst at others, it searches keenly among the leaves for its prey, but I believe never alights on the ground, not even for the purpose of drinking, which act is

performed by passing lightly over the water and sipping, as it were, the quantity it needs. All my efforts to discover its nest in the lower parts of Kentucky, where I am confident that it breeds, have proven fruitless; and I have not heard that any other person has been more successful."

The varied though not altogether satisfactory notes on its

SMALL-HEADED FLYCATCHER, *Muscicapa minuta*, Wilson.

Description—Wilson, *American Ornithology*, Vol. VI., 1812, pl. L, fig. 5, p. 62

Upper parts—"dull yellow-olive"

Wing—"dusky-brown, edged with lighter, the greater and lesser coverts tipped with white"

Tail—"dusky-brown, the two exterior feathers with a spot of white on inner vanes"

Head—"remarkably small"

Lower parts—"dirty-white, stained with dull yellow, particularly on upper parts of breast"

Beak—"broad at base, furnished with bristles and notched at tip"

Tarsus—"dark brown"

Feet—"yellowish"

Iris—"dark hazel"

Sex—"male"

Length—"five inches"

Extent—"eight and a quarter inches"

Station—"orchard"

Locality—[Pennsylvania]

Date—"April 24," [1811]

Remarks—"From what quarter of the United States or of North America it is a wanderer, I am unable to determine, having never before met with an individual of the species. Its notes and manner of breeding, are also alike unknown to me. Remarkably active, running, climbing and darting about among the opening buds and blossoms with extraordinary agility."

habits, bespeak a much greater familiarity with the bird than the incomplete description would seem to warrant. The improbability of the only men in all our broad land at that time figuring birds capturing the only specimens of an anomalous or vanishing race, at a distance of many hundred

miles, is of course, very great indeed. What was long considered to have been an almost parallel instance,—the Blue Mountain Warbler, *Sylvia montana*=*Dendroica montana* of Wilson, was taken in the Blue mountains of Pennsylvania. The description of this species was so faithful that the writer of this paper, while in the pinfeather stage, with no other

SMALL-HEADED FLYCATCHER, *Wilsonia microcephala*, Ridgway. Audubon, *Birds of Am.*, Vol. III., 1838, pl. 434, fig. 3, *Orn. Biog.*, Vol. V., 1839, p. 291

“general color light greenish-brown”

“short, the second quill longest, dark olive, two bands of dull white”

“moderate length, even; outer feathers with a terminal white spot on inner web”

“greenish-yellow, narrow white ring surrounding the eye”

“pale yellow, gradually fading into white behind”

“male”

“margins of a pond”

“Kentucky”

“early part of the spring, 1808”

“Migratory, fond of low thick coverts, whether in the interior of swamp, only the margins of sluggish pools, from which it removes to higher situations after a continuation of wet weather to rolling grounds amid wood comparatively free of undergrowth. Song pleasing in this, which may be heard at a distance of 40 or 50 yards in clear weather. While chasing insects on the wing, although it clicks its bill, the sound is comparatively weak, at other times it searches among the leaves.”

work obtainable, was led to label an immature Black-throated Green Warbler thus, and Audubon's example came from California, loaned to him by the Zoological Society of London. Ridgway has recently referred Wilson's bird to *Dendroica virens* and Audubon's to *D. townsendii*. It has been written

that among the disproportionately large number of new species described by Wilson there are but two only remaining unidentified. This is now reduced to the one under present consideration. The lost species of Audubon are the Carbonated Warbler, *Dendroica carbonata*, and Cuvier's Kinglet, *Regulus cuvierii*, neither of which have since been found, but being hybrids presumably, may reoccur sooner or later; though perhaps we should not take them too seriously. Townsend's Bunting, *Spiza townsendii*, taken by Dr. Ezra Michener in Chester county, Pa., on the contrary is preserved to this time and remains unique.

While probably little effort has been made since the time of Audubon, to solve the mystery by careful search for the lost species in the so-called feud belt and really little worked regions of Kentucky; yet it must be admitted that were there the remotest chance of success, some of our most enterprising private collectors as well as corps from public museums, would have raked that section with fine-tooth combs, figuratively speaking.

Reverting once more to the dispute, it is evident that neither Audubon, nor Ord and Lawson were unprejudiced. Just how little or how much it figured in their testimony, it is impossible to determine. Had the charge appeared during the life of Bartram, to whom Wilson imparted his discoveries and with whom he resided sometime previous to the publication of this drawing, a perfectly unbiased statement might have been possible.

At this late date no eventuality, excepting only indisputable documentary evidence, can prove beyond all doubt the falsity or blameworthiness of one or the other; and as the matter stands, Audubon's tardy unproven accusation of piracy, the publication of which adds no lustre to his name, but rather detracts therefrom, should be discredited, expurgated, forgotten; and the memory of the also intensely human "Father of American Ornithology" be unsullied by an ungenerous suspicion, born of personal incompatibility, rather than the accidental difference in birth.

A resume of the earnest efforts looking to a satisfactory

cataloging of this bird is but a paragraph in the history of that spasmodic, prolonged and, for the most part, sincere striving to bring order out of chaos. Wilson labeled it *Muscicapa minuta*, identifying it with an old and very elastic group which not only contained our true Flycatchers, but the Vireos, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, American Redstart, Canadian and Wilson's Black-capped Warbler. This disposition was acceptable to Ord, Jardine, Nuttall (1832), Audubon, Peabody, Putnam, Minot, and used by Townsend as late as 1904. Bonaparte, however, as early as 1824, calls attention to Wilson's mistake in classifying this bird: "A new species of Wilson, omitted in the index. We have not seen it, but judging from the too much reduced figure, we rather think it is a *Sylvia*. The specific name is preoccupied in *Muscicapa*, and also in *Sylvia*, Wilson having applied it to one of his new Warblers; but as I have discovered that his *S. minuta* (Prairie Warbler) is the *S. discolor* of Vieillot, his specific name for this species, if it be a *Sylvia*, may be retained." In 1831, Jamison seems inclined to follow Bonaparte's suggestion of *Sylvia minuta*, and in 1837 Richardson lists it as *Setophaga minuta*, and is followed by Hoy and Gray. But Bonaparte proposes *Wilsonia minuta* in 1838, and Nuttall in his second edition, published in 1840, calls it the Small-headed Sylvian Flycatcher, *Sylvania pumilia*, not only quoting Wilson and Audubon on *M. minuta*, but Vieillot on *S. pumilia*, very evidently confusing species not identical and neither one referable to any known species to this day. This stood until 1858, when Baird writes it *?Myiodioctes minutus*, rejecting Bonaparte's *Wilsonia* on the score of preoccupation in botany, and placing it in a genus proposed by Audubon for the Canadian, Hooded and Wilson's Warblers, with the following comments: "It seems to be a perfectly distinct species from any other I have described, and evidently belongs to the *Oscines* rather than the *Tyrannulas* (*Clamatores*). * * * The white spots on the tail distinguished it readily from any of our true tyrant flycatchers. The introduction of the bird into the genus *Myiodioctes* is purely conjectural, although its affinities seem nearest to the Hooded Warbler." Baird is consistent in the

use of this name in 1859, 1865 and 1874, and is followed by Trumbull, Brewer in 1875, Ridgway in 1881, Maynard and Sharp. Coues hovers uncertainly between *Muscicapa* or *Myiodyctes 'minuta'* in 1868 and *Myiodiocytes? minutus* in 1878. Allen follows Bonaparte's *Wilsonia minuta* in 1864, 1869 and 1870, but reverts to *Myiodiocytes* in 1878. Coues retained *Muscicapa minuta* in 1872, remarking that it is conjectured to belong to the genus *Myiodiocytes*, but asserting that this can hardly be, two white wing bands being a character not shown in that genus; and rejects *Wilsonia* because preoccupied in botany and also used in entomology. He accepts *Myiodiocytes* in 1878, however; but in April, 1880, declares. "If the use of a genus name in botany does not preclude its acceptance in zoology, *Wilsonia* should replace *Myiodiocytes* Aud.," and he apparently decides that it does not, for he uses it three years later in *New England Bird life*, in fact he had already used it in the first edition of that work in 1873; and Ridgway had clearly set his stamp of approval on the name in his catalogue issued the same year as the question was raised by Coues. Stejneger in 1881 concurs: "If the name *Wilsonia* (Bonaparte, 1838) cannot be rejected, because preoccupied in botany, it will have to take precedence of *Myiodiocytes* Aud. 1839." Heretofore the controversy has been chiefly on the generic name, but in 1885 Ridgway substituted the specific name *Microcephala* for that of Baird's *minutus*, the latter proving to be preoccupied, and reviving Nuttall's genus *Sylvania*; and in the Hypothetical List of the first two editions of the A. O. U. Check-List, issued in 1886 and 1895, a tentative indorsement of Ridgway's proposition is given in *Sylvania? microcephala*.

Chamberlain in 1891 and Ridgway in 1896 repeating. Coues comments upon this in the Untenability of the Genus *Sylvania* Nutt., in the *Auk* for April, 1897, and effectually disposes of the name: "My tacit acquiescence in our use of *Sylvania* has hitherto been simply because I had no special occasion to notice the matter, and presumed that our committee had found the name tenable by our rules. But a glance at Nuttall's *Man.*, I, 1832, p. 290, where the name is

introduced, shows that it can have no standing, being merely a new designation of *Setophaga* Sw. 1827, and therefore a strict synonym. Nuttall formally and expressly gives it as such, making it a sub-genus (of *Muscicapa*) in the following terms: 'Sub-genus *Sylvania*. (Genus *Setophaga* Swainson). This is enough to kill it—say rather, the name is still-born; and why we ever undertook to resuscitate it passes my understanding. * * * *Sylvania* must be dropped and our choice of a name for the genus lies between *Wilsonia* Bp., 1838, and *Myiodiotes*, Aud., 1839. Use of *Wilsonia* in botany does not debar it in zoology, and if it is not otherwise preoccupied it must stand." Soon after its rejection by Baird in 1858 on the ground of botanical preoccupation, it was used by Dr. Allen in Proc. Essex Inst., IV, 1864, p. 64, and in various other places in succeeding years. * * * The Ninth Supplement to the A. O. U. Check List of North American Birds, issued in January, 1899, abandons the *Sylvania* of Nuttall for the *Wilsonia* of Bonaparte, first published in his Geographical and Comparative List, 1838, and the technical name of the rechristened Small-headed Warbler is now officially known as *Wilsonia microcephala* Ridgw., after almost three-quarters of a century participation in the home-made tangle.

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1902. Ridgway, Robert. Birds of North and Middle America, II. *Wilsonia microcephala* Ridgway. ("Pennsylvania and New Jersey; also, according to Audubon, Kentucky.")
1904. Townsend, Charles Wendall, M.D. The Birds of Essex County, Mass. *Memoirs of the Nuttall Orn. Club*, No. III, *Muscicapa minuta*, p. 318. ("Brewer at Wenham.")
1907. Chapman, Frank M. Warblers of North America, Hypothetical List, *Wilsonia microcephala* (Ridg.), pp. 299-300.
1908. Trotter, Spencer. Type Birds of Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey. *Cassinia*, XI. 1907, *Muscicapa minuta* (Wils.), p. 25. ("This species, not since detected and the basis of Audubon's attack on Wilson and Ord's counter charge, is stated by the latter to have been secured by Wilson near Philadelphia.")

THE BIRDS OF POINT PEELEE.

BY P. A. TAVERNER AND B. H. SWALES.

(Continued from Vol. XIX. p. 153.)

142.† *Piranga erythromelas*.—Scarlet Tanager.

We have found the Scarlet Tanager common on all May visits. In the fall it has not been as numerous as the abundance of other species would lead us to anticipate. From September 4 to 15, 1905, we saw but five, all on the 5th. The next year one was seen September 1 and none on the succeeding visit in the middle of the same month. However, on October 14 three were secured or taken. In 1907 from August 26 to September 2 one or two were noted each day. In all probability it is a more or less common summer resident.

143. *Progne subis*.—Purple Martin.

The Purple Martin has always been present on the occasions of our May trips about the streets of Leamington, where a colony or colonies continue to hold out. Swales, in his trip from May 1 to 4, 1908, discovered from ten to several there, while at the same time they had not arrived in any numbers in Detroit. Our fall dates have usually been a little late for this species, which usually leaves these localities before the end of August.

In the fall of 1905 Lynds Jones' work among the outlying islands

†Owing to a mistake of the writer, the numbering of some of the last species in the previous installment of this list is incorrect. This is the proper number of this species in its sequence in the list.