BOOK REVIEW

The Feathery Tribe: Robert Ridgway and the Modern Study of Birds, by Daniel Lewis. 2012. Yale University Press, New Haven. 346 pages including approximately 20 black and white photographs and illustrations. Hardback, $45. ISBN 978-0-300-17552-3.

The term "feathery tribe" in the title is much too cute for what is principally a work aiming at scholarship. The author states in the preface that the "book is about what it meant to be a professional studying birds in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, how a professional class emerged, what it looked like, what roles amateurs played, and how these changes led to the science of ornithology as we practice it today" (p. ix–x). All of these are touched upon at various levels. Lewis's chronicle includes a brief history of the Smithsonian Institution, the early growth and importance of its bird collection, the development of professional ornithology, and the influence of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), with Robert Ridgway as the principal person of the story. According to the author, Ridgway was a world-renowned ornithologist who "is largely forgotten today." Forgotten!? Countless birders and ornithologists do remember Ridgway today.

Chapter 1 of the seven chapters reveals a teenage Ridgway communicating with Spencer Baird, then assistant secretary of Smithsonian. The relationship between the two individuals led to Ridgway accompanying the Fortieth Parallel Survey, where he recorded observations and collected birds in 1867. At the end of the expedition, Ridgway became a paid illustrator at Smithsonian. Chapter 2, "The Smithsonian Years," outlines some of the important people Baird mentored, including Ridgway, and others such as Elliott Coues (pronounced "cows," according to oral history), Henry Henshaw, William H. Dall, Leonhard Stejneger, and others whose names now appear in the English and scientific names of North American avifauna. Ridgway was paid $1000 per year beginning in 1874. Not mentioned by Lewis, Ridgway's salary equates to only $3.84 per day, assuming he worked only a 40-hour week. Ridgway might have earned more had it not been for the Long Depression, a 23-year worldwide economic crisis beginning in 1873. Even so, salaries from museums traditionally were/are low. By 1882, Smithsonian's collection of birds was 50,000 specimens, which Lewis states (p. 38) "allowed Ridgway to see synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, and other parts of speech among the morphological language of birds." Perhaps Lewis is using poetic license or betraying a lack of understanding since nomenclatural matters such as synonyms, etc., are not necessarily contingent on the number of available specimens. The last part of Chapter 2, "The Division of Birds," may disappoint anyone who has visited or worked in the Division of Birds. Lewis mentions the pride of working there and might have mentioned that that holds true today, as do descriptions of crowding, low budgets, and maintaining a well-curated collection while contributing to the influence of the Smithsonian.

Chapter 3 is less about Ridgway and more about the founding of ornithological organizations beginning with the Nuttall Ornithological Club in 1873 and, in 1883, the AOU. Lewis writes of the organization and founding of the *Auk* and that the Nuttall's Ornithological Club and AOU fostered a new kind of bird professionalism. Part of the new professionalism would grapple with differences between science and the lay, with the concept of evolution (Darwin's theory was then relatively new to science, as Lewis reminds the reader more than once) and devising a code to clarify and stabilize avian nomenclature. Chapter 4 includes discussion of early bird collections, which provides the worm for Chapter 5 on the code of nomenclature and the importance of checklists. Those were subjects important to Robert Ridgway, who described more new species and subspecies of birds than did any other North American ornithologist. Ridgway's studies of specimens helped determine aspects of geographic variation, and his naming groups of similar specimens, guided by a code

of nomenclature, further contributed to the science of evolution. Ridgway was among the five men who formed the first Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the AOU that today is a committee of twelve. Lewis writes about the power of the committee that, with a mere three votes could either "enshrine" a name or "banish" it to the "waste-bin of history." But sending a name to the "waste-bin" does not mean it is unavailable for use. Furthermore, we cannot know the truth about how the committee voted without knowing the details of any particular judgment, and Lewis does not provide such information. As dramatic as it might have seemed, voting by the early committee, although surely not without debate, should not have produced histrionics as implied, particularly votes by Ridgway, whose taxonomy at the time was far more often right than wrong by current knowledge. Lewis notes that the AOU code became the framework for the Code of the International Congress, now the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, which, in brief, promotes stability and universality in nomenclature.

The last two chapters concern publications by Robert Ridgway. The first of these discusses aspects of technical writing and Ridgway's wish to get information out to as large an audience as possible on a timely schedule. Ridgway published 17,000 pages in 553 papers and 23 monographs, including his multivolume *Birds of North and Middle America* (*U.S. National Museum Bulletin* 50, parts 1–11), which he began in 1901. The last part Ridgway wrote, part 8, was completed in 1919; the final three volumes were published posthumously. Lewis relates those volumes as popularly known as Bulletin 50. To most of those using and often depending on them, the volumes are known simply as "Ridgway." In part 1, Ridgway attempted to appease the different camps about popular and scientific approaches to birds. In fact, one theme in *The Feathery Tribe* is to what extent, if any, the scientific community should present articles in popular style. Whether there was a virtual caste system of people interested in birds in the United States, the method of presentation separating those who pursue birds as science and those who engage with birds strictly for pleasure may have been an issue that has since eroded. Perhaps this is what Lewis is alluding to in the undefined "Modern Study of Birds" part of the title. Without some sort of boundary, "modern" in the title has little meaning.

Among Robert Ridgway's formidable output is his work to standardize terms for colors of birds. Lewis rated the *Color Standards and Color Nomenclature* (1912, self-published) as the reason why Ridgway "is most widely known." Use of those standards by later ornithologists and adherents of other disciplines is certainly true. Among ornithologists and birders, however, Ridgway is more widely known from Bulletin 50 and his other useful publications.

A useful appendix lists Ridgway's publications. His first paper appeared in 1869, his last in 1929. Not all of the entries are correct. For example, Ridgway's *Birds of Colorado Check List*, listed as 1873, was actually published in February 1874 (Banks and Browning, *Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington* 92:195–203, 1979). Lewis lists the parts of Bulletin 50 by their complete title and in brackets states, "cited as Bulletin 50." However, I know no one who omits "U.S. Natl. Mus." as preceding Bulletin 50.

Other omissions and errors include the use of Hirundinidae for the family name of flycatchers (p. 178), lack of clarity without an English name (Lark Sparrow) for *Chondestes grammacus* (p. 9), use of the word species vs. specimen (p. 136), and "dies" instead of "dyes" for substances that impart color (p. 190). In Chapter 3, the caption of a photo of Ridgway at his desk mentions two of his fingers as blackened by arsenic, and Lewis mentions the hazards of arsenic as a preservative for specimens. Had the author checked (e.g., back issues of *Who's Who in America,* Chicago, A. N. Marquis), he would have found museum ornithologists exposed to arsenic living far beyond the normal life span of workers in other professions.

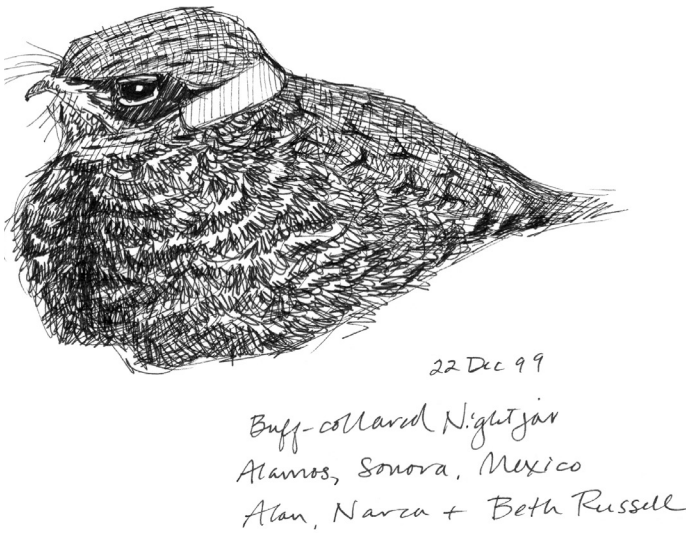
History repeats itself. We learn that Ridgway found *Empidonax* troubling, experienced frequent changes in nomenclature, and coped with funding problems, events

familiar in this century. Dedication and diligence allowed Ridgway to overcome pesky flycatchers and adverse budgets. Lewis (p. 211) believes that Bulletin 50 "put the nail in the coffin of systematics as a key means to study birds as a profession." On the contrary. Historically, Ridgway kept up to date, and, like others to follow, built upon the heroic Bulletin 50. Systematics today relies not merely on genetics, but on behavior, morphology, and correct nomenclature as well.

A time line would have helped set the stage for the various players. Also missing from *The Feathery Tribe* is reference to Richard Banks's chapter (pp. 33–54) on the U.S. National Museum (*Mem. Nuttall Ornithol. Club* 12, 1995) that concisely summarizes considerable subject matter relevant in Lewis's pages. Robert Ridgway's career overlapped with that of eminent ornithologist Alexander Wetmore, who became secretary to the Smithsonian. Wetmore also did a stint with the National Biological Survey (now under the Department of Interior), which houses its specimens with those in Smithsonian. The survey, which Lewis does not seem to mention, provided thousands of specimens of birds useful to Ridgway. I never heard Wetmore offer anything but praise for Ridgway.

In the preface, Lewis hopes more will be written about these subjects. I look forward to that and, in the interim, believe prospective readers will learn from and enjoy the present work. Both casual and seasoned birders may find the book useful in helping them understand some of the elements of early ornithology.

M. Ralph Browning



Antrostomus ridgwayi

Field sketch by Narca Moore-Craig