

!Priority! The Dating of Scientific Names in Ornithology: A Directory to the Literature and its Reviewers

Compiled and edited by: Edward C. Dickinson, Leslie K. Overstreet, Robert J. Dowsett and Murray D. Bruce. Aves Press, Northampton, U.K. 319 pages. 135.00 USD. Cloth.

The *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature* (I.C.Z.N.) governs the application and use of scientific names in zoology. The date of its starting point has long been arbitrarily fixed as 1 January 1758, the year that Linnaeus published *Systema Naturae*. One of the founding principles of the I.C.Z.N. is the Principle of Priority, which historically, with a few exceptions, has been applied strictly and consistently. But, as was stated in 1948 concerning botanical scientific names, "it demands much time to unearth certain notes, comments or reference, concerning dates of publication."

Publication of this sumptuous treasure trove of interesting and often useful facts is proof that the complicated search for even earlier names and descriptions of taxa continues. The four compilers have brought together "a compendium of what has been learned and published" with "references to where to find the best advice on dating." They explain how, until recently, James L. Peters' 16-volume *Check-list of the Birds of the World*, begun in 1931 and completed twenty years after his death in 1986, has served as the baseline. They investigate in detail 156 books and 118 leading journals, noting particularly how long-accepted dates of publication given in a book or journal may vary appreciably from the actual date of appearance in print. They present a useful Glossary, an extensive reference list and peripheral items that include Russian names for

months, the French Revolutionary Calendar which functioned from 1792 to 1806, and explain where to search for watermarks. They provide helpful background, discuss implications of their findings, and attach a compendious CD-ROM for detailed reference.

The four compilers – aided by 80 contributors (including 3 from Canada) and 184 others who supplied information, have relied heavily on two unpublished card indexes. One had been compiled by Charles Davies Sherborn (1862-1942) in the general library of the Natural History Museum in London, England, and the other by Charles Wallace Richmond (1868-1932) in the Division of Birds in the Natural Museum of Natural History in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The book is dedicated to their memory. The four compilers also speak highly of *Zoonomen*, "a rich and helpful web resource" – whose webmaster is a medical pathologist in Walla Walla, Washington.

The compilers rate 156 "landmark" (my term) books that have contained new scientific names. In 50 instances they have rated the exact dates of publications as Resolved, 83 as Best Available and 23 as Unresolved. Similarly for 118 scientific journals, only 37 were Resolved, 40 were Best Available, and a surprisingly high 41 were Unresolved. Another 47 listed journals have not yet been assessed. The CD ROM, attached to the inside back cover of the book, provides tables of dates compiled for 18 of the books and 47 of the

periodicals and a 34-page table of taxon names where a new name appeared in a work that was previously misdated. Even so, some of the provisional dates given here “are expected to be modified as a consequence of future work.”

The reader is left with the fear that undetected or inadequately studied dates may in future cause a few type specimens currently accepted, to be proven not to have the priority assumed. Let me provide one example from Saskatchewan experience. As late as 1995 Banks and Browning (*Auk* 112:633-648, 1995) proved that *Fauna Boreali-Americana, volume 2, The Birds*, with a stated publication date of 1831, had not reached print until February 1832, whereas Nuttall’s 1832 *Manual* was available for sale in December 1831! This discovery stripped the credit for the first or “type” specimen of the Olive-sided Flycatcher from Richardson and Drummond’s 1827 specimen from Carlton on the North Saskatchewan, named *Contopus borealis* by Swainson. After use for 163 years, the priority was awarded to Nuttall’s specimen from Mount Auburn, next door to Boston.

The compilers admit they rushed this incomplete study into print because of impending publication of the 4th edition of the *Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World*. They consider *Priority!* to be its pre-requisite. Thus their ongoing project is in itself a little scary. Now that taxonomy is already, appropriately, in turmoil due to new sophisticated studies of bird vocalizations and especially DNA-based studies, which call for division of some genera

into new species, I propose a question. Will it not soon be time (e.g., the 300th anniversary of Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* in 2158), to give a definite date when, for practical reasons, a study of priority should cease?

Priority! catalogues past errors, irregular timing of journal publication, and unfortunate errors in documentation by first describers of new genera, species and subspecies. It is moderately reassuring that many books and journals can be accepted as fact, but 23 of the books and 43 of the journals studied require further investigation of their dates of publication.

In summary, this book, the first to explain the importance of priority in naming new bird taxa, is only a beginning. One cannot turn back the clock, but I cannot help wishing that someone had undertaken this prodigious five-year effort a century sooner. The compilers call for “standard usage of names” (p.8), yet they identify sources where dates are sufficiently variable, inconsistent or obscure, that taxonomists with an historical bent can search for new priorities that will change current names, contravening rather than supporting standard usage. The compilers admit that “many ornithologists regard dates as of trivial importance.” Only for someone like me who is interested in ornithological nomenclature, will this book be fun to read; yet at times it becomes repetitious and at times pedantic with minutiae. In spite of its relatively high price, I predict it will become a must for every major University library and museum.

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