

THE FEATHERY TRIBE: ROBERT RIDGWAY AND THE MODERN STUDY OF BIRDS

Lewis, D. 2012. New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press. 346 pp. 20 black and white illustrations. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-300-17552-3, US\$45.

Do you remember that key moment when you knew that birds would be a part of your life, for the rest of your life? *The Feathery Tribe* fascinates the reader by capturing these key moments in the life of Robert Ridgway, erstwhile “giant in the world of avian systematics, taxonomy, nomenclature, writing and publishing for nearly half a century” (p. 1). While crafting Ridgway’s biography in *The Feathery Tribe*, author Daniel Lewis also weaves in the key moments — and challenges — leading to the nascence of professional ornithology in North America.

The book begins by painting the picture of Robert Ridgway’s early life and formative moments as a natural historian and his eventual employment at the Smithsonian Institution. The first chapter, *The Making of a Bird Man*, describes Ridgway’s childhood in Illinois: he explored the wilderness with like-minded friends and hunted, sometimes for food but also to build his bird collection, which functioned as Robbie’s first field guide to the birds. Early on, it was clear that Ridgway was a precocious and talented natural historian, a fact that Ridgway’s lifelong mentor, Spencer Fullerton Baird, recognized and cultivated through a series of letters — starting when Robbie was 13 — about the identification of the birds Ridgway was finding. Even at his young age, this correspondence was characterized by careful, measured, precise descriptions and illustrations of birds by Ridgway, a habit that stood him in excellent stead for his eventual career.

Starting to correspond with Baird must have been a key moment for Robert Ridgway, and a second emerged when, in 1867, Baird helped launch Ridgway’s career by arranging to have him serve as a naturalist on Clarence King’s Fortieth Parallel Survey. A lack of finances ended Ridgway’s participation on the Survey in 1868 but he soon launched into a permanent job at the Smithsonian, the focus of the book’s second chapter, *The Smithsonian Years*. Ridgway’s duties at the Smithsonian allowed him to be deeply engaged in the science of the day as “he was [hard] at work at nothing less than untangling the relationships among birds” (p. 38) and eventually became the “undisputed king of birds” (p. 65). In addition to his responsibilities identifying, cataloguing and caring for an enormous collection of bird skins and other materials, Ridgway maintained an immense written correspondence and exchange of specimens with a wide network of colleagues and amateurs who sought his expertise.

Two important tensions emerge from Lewis’ description of the formation of *America’s First Bird Organizations*, a topic he takes up in chapter 3. One is the pressure the feathery tribe likely felt to place their findings in the context of evolution given the recent publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. A second was the growing disconnect between amateur and professional ornithologists. Darwin’s work, as well as the feathery tribe’s desire to get the word out about birds, led to the formation of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, but this also inflamed the contrast between the popular prose that amateurs wanted to share with the science that the professionals felt obligated to present. Ridgway’s expertise made him a natural leader in presenting the science about birds,

although his self-described diffidence kept him largely out of the spotlight until the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) and the *Auk* emerged in 1883. The formation of the AOU marked a major milestone in American ornithology. Indeed, the first convention of the AOU, held in late September in 1883, marked a key moment for both Ridgway, who became one of the AOU’s vice presidents, and for the scientific study of birds.

With Ridgway’s prominent position secure among the world’s bird experts, Lewis moves to his profession in chapters 4, 5, and 6, covering bird collections, nomenclature, and ornithological publications, respectively. The work of bird collectors, described in Chapter 4, *Bird Study Collections*, formed a sort of “language,” Lewis notes, that Ridgway and others used to craft a name “dictionary,” (p.146) a system of nomenclature described in Chapter 5, that can be used to communicate clearly about birds while capturing in their names a bit of their biology and evolutionary place in the world. The careful, precise language young Robbie used to communicate with his mentor, Baird, in the early days was a hallmark that characterized his most important contributions, including *Bulletin 50* or *The Birds of Middle and North America*, a massive 11-volume work describing in infinite detail everything there was to know about birds in that region of the world. While *Bulletin 50* was thought to be impenetrable by lay readers because of its technical detail, Lewis makes a beautiful point about the importance of Ridgway’s language in communicating science: “the evolution of scientific language and grammar, distributed to an audience via print, makes the evolution of scientific thought possible.” (p. 226)

In his final chapter, Lewis tells the story of Ridgway’s contributions to the lexicon of color. Early on, Ridgway spent time in his father’s drugstore, mixing up colors that he used in his early bird illustrations. As with his verbal descriptions in *Bulletin 50* and elsewhere, Ridgway strove to capture the smallest detail absolutely precisely. It was this effort at accuracy and precision that motivated Ridgway to develop a straightforward classification system that could be used reliably by other workers needing to describe color.

In sum, I liked this book; it is artfully written and thoroughly researched. Lewis drew me in describing the young Robbie Ridgway — from his exploits with a shotgun (he was perhaps not the best shot) to his first correspondence with Baird — and kept my attention by weaving details from Ridgway’s personal story with the larger picture about the development of professional ornithology in the context of the place and times. While Robert Ridgway may have become, as Lewis describes, “an anachronism” (p. 262) by the end of his life, I suspect his impact on the world of ornithology — and his place at the head of the feathery tribe — will again come to light thanks to Daniel Lewis’ delightful book.

Kate Huyvaert, Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523 (kate.huyvaert@colostate.edu)