

Letters

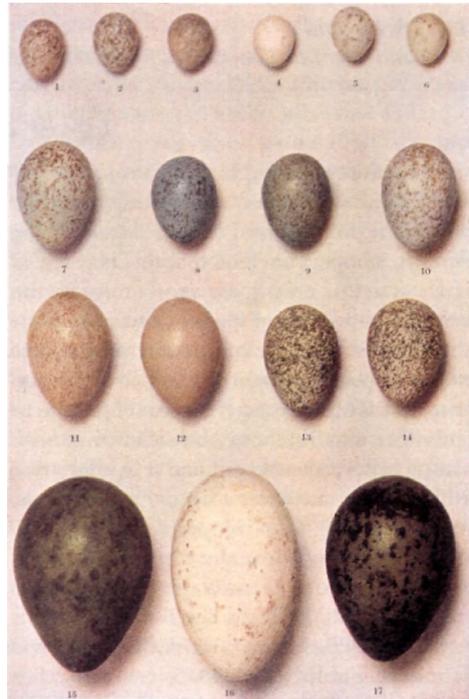
The egg of the Slender-billed Curlew at The Manchester Museum: a unique specimen?

Gretton *et al.* (2002) provided a detailed history of the discovery of the nesting grounds of the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* by V. E. Ushakov, at Tara, in the valley of the Irtysh River, Russia, in or before 1908. This note provides some additional background information on the egg collected by Ushakov on 2nd June 1909, now housed in the Henry Dresser collection at The Manchester Museum.

Henry Dresser (1838-1915) was one of the most prominent ornithologists in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and is best remembered for producing large folio works, including *A History of the Birds of Europe* (Dresser 1871-1896, 1902-1903, 1905-1910). Dresser's collection of approximately 10,000 bird skins was purchased by an anonymous benefactor in 1899 and generously donated to The Manchester Museum (Anon 1899). His egg collection and private library were housed in the museum from 1912 (Anon 1912), and were bequeathed to the museum on his death in 1915. The collection contains specimens acquired by many of the most notable of nineteenth and early twentieth century collectors. There is also a small archive of papers, letters and photographs; Dresser's private library, however, is now housed in the Special Collections of the John Rylands University Library, Manchester. The collection of eggs and skins was catalogued on to an electronic database in the 1990s, which can be accessed on The Manchester Museum website (www.museum.man.ac.uk).

Dresser corresponded regularly with other notable ornithologists, often in their own language. His main correspondent in Russia was Sergius Alexandreevich Buturlin, famous for the discovery, in 1905, of numbers of Ross's Gulls *Rhodostethia rosea* breeding in the Kolyma Delta, Russia. Buturlin sent a number of specimens to Dresser (Dresser 1906; McGhie & Logunov, in prep.), and acted as an intermediary between Dresser and a number of other Russian ornithologists, including Ushakov. Dresser's plate for the genus *Numenius* was issued with parts 19-20 of *The Eggs of the Birds of Europe*, in September 1909, and does not include Slender-billed Curlew. The text for the curlews was issued with parts 21-22, in February 1910, and

does include Slender-billed Curlew, so presumably Dresser received the information between the periods of production of these sections. Buturlin appears to have translated Ushakov's 1909 account of the discovery of the breeding grounds for Dresser (see Dresser 1910), and he is commended for producing 'the true facts... concerning *Numenius tenuirostris* and its breeding range' (Anon 1910). The eggs of the species were illustrated for the first time, together with a number of newly discovered eggs of other species, in an appendix plate issued with parts 23-24, in November 1910. The egg in The Manchester Museum is pictured together with an egg collected by Schastovski at Lake Tschany (Lake Chany) on 20th May 1909, and recorded as being in Tomsk Museum. This would appear to be the only time that eggs of this species have ever been illustrated.



224. Eggs of Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*. Egg collected by Ushakov on 2nd June 1909 and now in The Manchester Museum (bottom left). Egg collected by Schastovski on 20th May 1909 (bottom right).

Plate reproduced from Dresser 1910.

The egg collected by Ushakov still resides in the collections in The Manchester Museum (although, at the time of writing, it is temporarily unavailable as a result of redevelopment at the museum). The appendix plate from Dresser's book is reproduced here (plate 224); this shows the egg collected by Ushakov at the bottom left, and that collected by Schastovski at the bottom right. The plate was produced from photographs of the eggs printed using the 'three colour process' (see Dresser 1902). It is not known whether Schastovski's specimen still resides in the Tomsk Museum. Similarly, the whereabouts of a clutch of four eggs sold by Ushakov to a Mr Potter in 1909 or 1910 are unknown (Gretton *et al.* 2002). In light of these facts, the specimen in The Manchester Museum may well be the only one in existence. It is to be hoped that the Slender-billed Curlew will somehow manage a turnaround from imminent extinction, but failing this the Manchester specimen will remain a fragile piece of evidence of the former breeding of this enigmatic species, and a precious piece of natural heritage for future generations.

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Lower case lunacy

My irritation at seeing bird names printed in lower case has gradually evolved into outright fury, to the point where I have to do something about it. I hope, therefore, that this is going to be the start of a campaign for sanity in the writing and printing of species names.

The most obvious culprits are newspapers and non-specialised journals, which is no surprise because there is no real reason for them to care either way. But those who are involved with natural history *should* care, and it is infuriating to find that some natural history publications, such as *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and *Natural World*, blindly follow the Philistines. Most prominent among them is the RSPB, in their magazine *Birds*. They did not always sin in this way. The *RSPB Guide to British Birds* by David Saunders, published in 1975, correctly uses initial capitals for the species names. Why change? If it ain't broke, don't fix it. 'Fixing', of course, so often leads to disaster, as in this case.

To be fair to the RSPB, they did try to justify their use of lower case and corresponded with me perfectly openly about it. Yet I find it incom-

prehensible that anyone would want to change from a method used successfully for years to one beset with problems. The reasons they gave for doing so, all of them highly subjective, are revealing. They state that: 'We consider the use of lower case for bird names is more modern and less intrusive, particularly when many birds are mentioned together in a sentence.' Being 'modern' is not in itself a good reason for doing something and is inherently dangerous since, by definition, today's 'modern' is tomorrow's 'passé'. 'Less intrusive' is surely perverse. Who wants bird names to be less intrusive in a bird magazine? I want to be able to scan a page and have the bird names jump out at me.

The RSPB continue in defence of their use of lower case: 'Our belief is that...the reader's eye is trained to stop at capital letters.' There is no justification for such an assertion; the reader's eye is not trained in the sense that it is formally taught. My eye is accustomed to seeing a capital at the beginning of a sentence. Far from stopping at the capital, my eye starts there and keeps going. This is a self-defeating point because, as

we shall see, there are capital letters in some of their bird names.

Furthermore, they claim that: 'the scientific community is gradually adopting the same approach'. Simply because everyone else does it has never been a good reason to change, even if it were true. And in this case it is not true. I cannot list all the organisations that hold to initial capitals, but they include: The British Museum of Natural History, the British Ornithologists' Union (including *Ibis*), the BTO (including *Bird Study*), most of the mainstream birding periodicals, including *British Birds*, *Birdwatch*, *Dutch Birding* and *Birding World*, and bird books from the key natural history publishers.

Species names often consist of one or more adjectives plus a noun. In many cases the adjective is simple, being one of size or colour, for example Little Owl *Athene noctua* or Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*. In lower case, even these can lead to confusion. When is 'little' part of a species name and when is it just another way of saying 'small'? How are readers supposed to know, especially if they are not experienced birdwatchers? The RSPB's response to this point more or less concedes the argument (albeit unintentionally): 'We agree with you that occasionally the use of lower case could cause confusion, as with "little gull", but we try to avoid problems by clear sentence construction.' If lower case were viable, it would stand up in all circumstances; clearly it does not. Why should editors have to fiddle about with sentence construction just to serve the god of lower case? And what about the rest of us who are not blessed with such magical editorial powers? When initial capitals are used, these problems disappear.

There are many examples of birds on the British List where the adjective in lower case must pose difficulties for the inexperienced reader: Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca*, Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*, Elegant Tern *Sterna elegans*, Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica*, Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina* etc. A favourite of mine is 'aquatic warbler' (a warbler that goes in water?) and how about 'green warbler', 'greenish warbler' and 'two-barred greenish warbler' all appearing in the same sentence? Another example is the regular misunderstanding affecting wagtail identification for beginners. They are told that a wagtail with yellow confined

to the undertail coverts is a Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*. In lower case, it would not be wrong for them to say 'yellow wagtail', meaning a wagtail with yellow on it. Confusion reigns.

Capitals do sometimes occur in the middle of a list of bird names in lower case, when the adjective is, or is based upon, the name of a person or place, for example Iceland Gull *Larus glaucoides* or Ross's Gull *Rhodostethia rosea*. This only adds to the confusion and is a pathetic attempt at correctness. Take Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*. A sandwich is a common food item, but Sandwich is also a small town on the east coast of Kent. To know whether small 's' or capital 'S' should be used, you need to know how the name was derived; and how many people will go to that trouble? Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* explores even greater subtleties. Princess Isabella of Spain achieved notoriety by remaining unwashed and wearing the same pale linen clothing for several years thus acquiring an 'attractive' brownish-yellow appearance. So 'isabelline' is a colour, but it is based on a person's name. What now? Remote and unusual place names lie in wait for the unsuspecting, with the result that Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi* and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* have been incorrectly shown in lower case. What a mess!

Another reason given by the RSPB was that the dictionaries printed words such as 'black-bird', 'robin' etc. in lower case. That may be so, but *Oxford English Grammar* (Greenbaum, 1996) states that: 'Proper nouns name specific people, animals etc. They have a unique reference and in writing they begin with a capital letter.' Birds are animals and specific means 'species of' so that is almost conclusive. The term 'unique reference' gets right to the heart of the matter. Each bird species has its individual characters, of structure, plumage, voice and so on. They have a unique reference, which entitles them to equal status with people and places. Their names are proper nouns in accordance with the OEG definition.

To those who insist on continuing to use lower case for species names, we need a more logical and cogent explanation than 'it's modern' or 'it looks better'. The subject deserves more than the foppish following of fashion. To those who use initial capitals, please make your voices heard; for the sake of the birds, win this argument!

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