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THE FIRST BIRDSKIN OF ELLIOTT COUES.

(A BIT OF HISTORY.)

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What I am about to relate must have taken place along some time in the early 80's, but as to the exact year, or the month and much less the day of the month, I've quite forgotten. However, to the best of my recollection it was in the summer of 1882, as that year I was on duty in the Surgeon General's office at Washington.

In those days Doctor Coues was in his prime, both in the matter of physical health, as well as in literary activity. He occupied Professor Baird's old desk in a room of the north tower of the Smithsonian Institution, and was principally engaged in driving away at the second edition of the *Key to North American Birds*, that subsequently appeared in 1884. The room adjoining his was occupied by Doctor Gill and Henry W. Elliott, while the present writer was a privileged daily visitor at the twin sanctums.

Among us four Doctor Gill passed familiarly under the cognomen of "The Pope"; Coues somehow had come to be simply designated as "Couesi"; Elliott none other than the "Pygmy," owing to the comparative humble nature of his

scientific achievements; while I with my few papers on "bird-bones," occupied, by all odds, the most inferior position in these respects, and was made to feel it by bearing the title of the "Pygmiculus."

Those were the times when Robert Ridgway held forth in a room, several flights up, in the south tower—a "den" in which he did a large part of his work, and where he was quite removed from all of those maddening annoyances that inevitably attend an ornithological writer of his reputation, occupying a government position. There were so many persons who were more than eager to have him tell them just how many eggs a chippy-bird laid, or what he used to "stuff birds with," and how much he had to pay for glass-eyes, and was it true that the pelican fed her young with her own blood, and was the Bible right in stating that a bat was a bird, and would all kinds of birds' eggs hatch out in an incubator, and,—and the rest.

For me, during that summer, it was one of the treats of my life to be able to spend half an hour a couple of times a week in that old room of Ridgway's, especially when he was busily engaged painting the picture of some bird or other, as he sat at the quaint old desk over by the window. I remember how I used to marvel at the rapidity of his work, and his superb appreciation of the value of pigments and color.

Early one afternoon, somewhere along in the time I have mentioned, I climbed up the narrow and stony stairway to see him about something I had in mind, and upon coming into the room, to my wonderment I beheld a young pyramid of birdskins piled up on the floor, numbering evidently several hundred, or perhaps a thousand, and representing everything apparently known to the avifauna of this country. In character, the skins much resembled those I used to "put up" in my 'teens, and before the opportunity was afforded me to make an exhibition of my ignorance as to where such a sudden influx of heterogeneous material had come from, Ridgway remarked that "Coues intends to turn in his collection"—in other words that ever-open scientific maw of immense proportions of the Smithsonian Institution was once again about

to receive into its cavity, close down upon, swallow and digest another contribution in the way of a donation, that its life might be prolonged, and strength given it to pass the torch to the ornithological workers of the years to come. Here indeed, ruthlessly heaped up on the floor, was the mass in the main of the bird material of his own gathering, from which Coues had, through the application of his merciless intellectual hydraulic press, squeezed out that great store of ornithological facts, which had furnished the food for hundreds of his papers and books and memoirs, and upon which his name was built. "*Dei et pisciculæ*," as Gill would say, what a classic poem might have been written in the presence of such a theme! But to the great loss to American literature and poetry, be it ever with regret said, the poet was not there, and even had he been, I am not at all sure but what he would have been quite asphyxiated in an atmosphere so charged with ornithological lore, and so rendered unable to command the necessary language to commemorate the incident. Moreover this aerial density was by no means diminished when Coues himself and Henry Elliott came at that moment into the room. For the benefit of those who were familiar with those two strenuous workers as they appeared on such occasions, during the times of which I speak, no pen sketch of mine is necessary, and others, who never knew them, will spare me the attempt of description.

After a moment's banter, which invariably took place when we three got together, and in which Ridgway took no part, Coues,—who had just rolled a cigarette,—with a characteristic wave of his hand, given to direct my attention to his heap of birdskins in the middle of the floor, remarked in words to this effect:

"Well, Shufeldt, what do you think of them?—pretty generous, am I not? going to turn the whole bunch in—reckon I am through with them, and I thought I would give the other fellows a chance to see if they can find any new species among them." This all in a breath, followed by a triple volume of smoke from his mouth and nostrils, that consumed nearly half of his cigarette to produce.

"Very generous, indeed," chimed in Elliott, with one of his broad winks, and a lateral pull of one of his long mustaches.

"Without a parallel in history," said I, "and may the recipient be truly thankful."

"Miraculously so," remarked Elliott, with a jovial grin, "miraculously so, Robert, miraculously so."

"Pick one out for yourself, Shufeldt," said Coues, "as a reminder,—just one, though, just one,—they are still mine, I believe, Ridgway?"

"Thanks in advance, and glad to get the chance," said I. And, passing to the stack, I commenced going over them, leisurely, with the view of making a choice. As I did so Coues and Elliott crossed the room to where Ridgway was, and stood with their backs to me, overlooking his work on the colored figure of the bird he was painting. I had about settled on some medium-sized specimen—an auk, I think—when my eye caught a funny-looking little sparrow-skin, which I casually picked up and examined the label. On the obverse side of this appeared:

"Coues Collection. No. 231. District of Columbia. *Spizella Pusilla*.—Feb. '58. Elliott Coues."

And on the reverse side:

"I keep this bird because it was the first one of my collection original No. 1."

A little tag attached to the foot bore the number 231. In an instant I recognized the fact that I had in my hand the first birdskin Coues had ever made, but at the same time I felt very sure that he would not care to part with it,—to say nothing as to what Ridgway might say about it. Assuming the best air of indifference I could muster, I stood up, reflecting most emphatically upon the heat of the day as I did so, and my inability to go through the entire collection in the time at my disposal, I said:

"Here, Coues, let me have this little sparrow,—it's only a common field sparrow, but will answer for all that I want, and the matter of room is an item with me." To which in substance he replied:

"Certainly, Shufeldt, any one that strikes your fancy, but it seems to me you might have made a better selection."

"Well," I said, "you are certain you can spare it?"

"Most assuredly," he replied. "It is yours and welcome."

With this Elliott chimed in:

"Well, Pygmieulus, for modesty, a quality I never suspected you of possessing, I am of the opinion that you are it,—d—n it, sir, why didn't you take a California Condor, sir, or a—well, words fail me to express my surprise, sir,—the way in which your modesty, sir, has defeated your better sense, sir, is simply rye-diculous."

Not heeding these caustic remarks, and holding the skin closely in my hand, I stepped over to where they stood, and holding the label near enough so that Coues could read it, I let him see first one side of it and then the other.

"Oh, hold on, Shufeldt, I did not mean that one. Here, let me have that, and you choose some other"—followed by all sorts of humble begging for the return of the specimen. But I was obdurate and paid no heed to all his pleadings, while in a few words I quickly let Ridgway and Elliott know what I held in my possession. The latter at once broke in with one of his usual good-natured, voluble tirades, in which he took all back that he had just said in regard to my modesty and lack of sense, and turning loose on Coues with his raillery, held him up for trusting such a notorious rascal as I was known to be,—and, especially in the matter of being trusted in selecting birdskins from another man's collection.

Ridgway said little or nothing, but his face was a study,—and it was very clear that the Smithsonian was never to be the possessor of the specimen,—which, of course, did not mean much, because it was only a field sparrow, anyway.

In the outcome there was no "hard feelings" left, and the incident in those busy days was soon forgotten, while I kept the skin, and after a lapse of a quarter of a century, have it yet, and the reproduction of a photograph I made of it a few days ago illustrates the present account as to how I obtained it.



Shufeldt, Robert Wilson. 1907. "The First Birdskin of Elliott Coues (A Bit of History)." *The Wilson bulletin* 19(3), 77–81.

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