

from California, and a new interior form of the Savannah Sparrow.¹ The latter is based, like the new form of Cowbird, on specimens from Humboldt County, Nevada, and named *Passerculus sandvicensis nevadensis*. It differs from *P. s. alaudinus*, its presumably nearest relative, in its extreme pale coloration. The type of *alaudinus* is stated to have come from California, and as the swarms of Savannah Sparrows that visit the coast region of California belong to the dark form, Mr. Grinnell has properly given the new name to the lighter colored interior form. He quotes Mr. Brewster as having previously called attention to the composite nature of the group of Savannah Sparrows hitherto referred to *alaudinus*.

With the addition of Mr. Grinnell's two new forms of the *Thryomanes bewicki* group, he claims to be "able clearly to distinguish . . . eight geographic races within the limits of the State of California, occupying as many separate areas of differentiation." These eight forms are here listed, with their ranges. The new forms are *T. b. marinensis*, occupying "the humid coast belt north of the Golden Gate and San Francisco Bay, in Marin and Sonoma counties," and *T. b. catalinae*, from Santa Catalina Island, southern California, differentiated from the adjoining mainland form *charienturus*, to which these island specimens were formerly referred. The former is separated from *spilurus*, as formerly circumscribed.

As the difference between "lumpers," "splitters," and "conservatives" is no doubt largely temperamental, we shall doubtless have all three classes always with us. But the downfall of trinomialism, if it ever comes, will be through its abuse, due to the temptation and facility it offers for ultra splitting. There are local differences that may be distinguishable to an expert that are often too trivial and too uncertain and insignificant to warrant recognition in nomenclature, since the added burden gives no commensurate return. The general facts may be recognized and recorded, and their significance noted, as is repeatedly done by good specialist who are not open to the charge of being lumpers. Mammals, for example, are far more plastic than birds, so much so that it is found necessary to pass over minor and extremely local variants in order not to reduce nomenclature, in the matter of subspecies, to a burden of names, a considerable portion of which would have not only little significance but would belittle the real function of nomenclature.—J. A. A.

Beebe on the Tail Feathers of the Motmots.²—It has long been known that the characteristic racket-shape of the central rectrices of certain species of Motmots is produced by the action of the bird itself in picking off the barbs from the subterminal portion of the feathers. That this act was performed by the bird purposely appeared so obvious that it has

¹ The Savannah Sparrow of the Great Basin. By Joseph Grinnell. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-316. February 21, 1910.

² Racket Formation in the Tail-Feathers of the Motmots. By C. William Beebe, Curator of Birds. *Zoologica: Scien. Contr. New York Zool. Soc.*, Vol. I, pp. 141-149, figs. 43-47. January 15, 1910.

almost universally been regarded as a case, unique among birds, of intentional self-mutilation, presumably for the purpose of ornamentation. Furthermore, as the rectrices exhibit a narrowing of the vane at the point where later denuded, this has been used by those who believe in the inheritability of acquired characters as evidence in support of their views.

As far back as 1885 Dr. Stejneger figured the tail of a specimen that had the middle feathers partly bare although the tail was only half grown. In his remarks he came very near the true solution of the problem, but his surmises were not quite correct in detail.

Mr. Beebe's conclusions are based on the study of a live specimen of *Momotus lessoni* and on the examination of skins of various species.

In the captive bird, on one occasion, the growing rectrices were found to be already denuded while yet enclosed in the sheath; in this case, therefore, any trimming by the bird, intentional or otherwise, was wholly precluded. While in this particular instance, the denudation was premature, due probably to the birds' low vitality, yet this condition is approached by another species, *Eumomota superciliaris*, in which the shaft is stripped for a greater distance than in its allies. Here the dropping of the very short barbs occurs almost as soon as the growing feather is free from the sheath and long before it has reached its full length.

Upon close examination of the tail feathers of *Momotus mexicanus* and other species it was found that in the freshly grown feather the portion later denuded differs from the normal part of the vane in having the basal part of the barbs almost free from barbules and the barbs themselves slightly weaker than usual. This naturally renders the barbs liable to break away from the shaft at the point of connection.

Mr. Beebe concludes that the trimming of the feathers is not intentional on the bird's part, but is merely incidental to the ordinary preening of the plumage, and that no inheritance of acquired characters is necessary to explain the constriction of the vane, both this feature and the basal degeneration of the vane being congenital and due to some wholly unknown cause.—W. DE W. M.

'*Cassinia*.'—'*Cassinia*, A Bird Annual,' has again promptly made its appearance, this being the tenth issue of the 'Proceedings' of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club of Philadelphia under this title, and forming No. XIII of the Proceedings of this active organization, which on January 6 of the present year celebrated its twentieth anniversary. As usual, it sticks to its text, the "Ornithology of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware," but, under the continuous editorship of Mr. Stone, contains, also as usual, matter of wide interest. The editor contributes another of his happy sketches of early Philadelphia ornithologists, this time dealing with the late Dr. Thomas B. Wilson, so well known as the liberal patron of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, to whose gifts the Academy owes its almost unrivalled natural history library and the Rivoli, Gould, and other notable collections of foreign birds, purchased



Beebe, William. 1910. "Beebe on the Tail Feathers of the Motmots." *The Auk* 27, 234–235. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4071149>.

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