

ON THE BEAN-GEESE.

BY

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In a recent number of this Journal I published a brief article on the known species of bean-geese, and I brought to notice some conclusions on these birds which had been arrived at by Mr. Alphéraky in his work on the Geese of Europe and Asia.

My remarks have called forth a considerable amount of discussion. First, Mr. Alphéraky wrote a pamphlet which was printed for private circulation and which has been reprinted in our Journal. He subsequently wrote to the *Field* (December 29th, 1906). Mr. Buturlin, another Russian naturalist, wrote to the *Field* (November 17th, 1906), and then again to the Editors of our Journal. I felt constrained to reply to Mr. Buturlin's communication to the *Field* in the same paper, although it seemed to me that an English newspaper was not the proper vehicle for the discussion of a paper which originally appeared in an Indian Journal of Natural History. Lastly, Mr. Stuart Baker has written a note on the same subject in the Journal of this Society.

I do not know how much longer these gentlemen intend to write and discuss these geese, but it appears to me that the time has arrived when I may make some remarks which, on my part, I intend to be final.

I made serious allegations against Mr. Alphéraky with regard to his treatment of three species of bean-geese found in Eastern Asia. I also made complaint of sundry minor matters, which being more or less matters of opinion, I do not now propose to notice further.

The first species I shall deal with is *A. serrirostris*. Mr. Alphéraky figures the bill of this goose of a yellow colour and asserts that the bill is always described as yellow or orange. Swinhoe, who described this species for the first time, says that the colour is pinkish-red. There is no getting away from this description, nor is there room for any insinuation that Swinhoe was mistaken about this simple character. He distinctly states (*Ibis*, 1867, p. 392) that two birds had the bill of this colour.

Mr. Alphéraky, in his pamphlet, says: "Contrarily to Mr. Oates's statement, this goose is not only known from Swinhoe's description,

but from the writings of several authors." It seems hardly necessary to point out that these authors were all mistaken. This accumulation of evidence proves nothing but that these authors were not competent to identify their bean-geese. Mr. Alphéraky would have us believe that these authors had critically discussed the question and come to the deliberate conviction that their geese with yellow bills were *A. serrirostris* in spite of what Swinhoe had written. Nothing of the sort. Many of these authors called their birds *A. segetum*, as Mr. Alphéraky himself confesses. Others adopted the name of *A. serrirostris* from perhaps some hazy notion that there was a goose of that name in Eastern Asia. It is ridiculous to contend that these authors have proved anything, one way or the other.

I do not know to what it is due, but it is a fact that *A. serrirostris* has been lost sight of for many years. I have failed to find any writer, except Swinhoe, who has mentioned the occurrence of a pink-billed bean-geese in Eastern Asia. I have quoted a note written by Mr. Styan relating to this species, but he makes no mention of the colour of the bill, and the only reason I have for knowing that he wrote about this particular goose was that he sent a specimen to the British Museum which agrees in all respects with Swinhoe's type.

Mr. Alphéraky states that he received three specimens of a bean-geese from the Anadyr in Eastern Siberia, on the labels of two of which it was recorded that the bills in life were flesh-coloured. This colour, we may take it, agrees with the pinkish-red described by Swinhoe. Here at once were specimens which might reasonably be indentified with *A. serrirostris*, and Mr. Alphéraky might have congratulated himself on having rediscovered the species in its summer quarters. So far from doing so, he tells us that these geese puzzled him; he thought them over night and day and did not know what to do with them. At last, with the greatest reluctance, he put them down as *A. serrirostris*, not, however, as the plain genuine species described by Swinhoe but as aberrant or dimorphic examples of Mr. Alphéraky's *A. serrirostris* with the yellow bill.

The simple fact which has caused Mr. Alphéraky to make such a disastrous blunder about this species is that, when writing his book, he was in complete ignorance of what Swinhoe had written. He overlooked Swinhoe's description, and, as I have already shewn, there was no other writer who could furnish him with a hint that there

was a goose with a pink bill in China and Eastern Asia. It may appear incredible that Mr. Alphéraky should neglect to inform himself upon such a matter, but the inference is irresistible when the following circumstances are taken into consideration.

In the first place, he figures the bill of *A. serrirostris* of a yellow colour, without stating his reason for differing from Swinhoe. In the second place, he writes a very long article on this species, extending over six and a half quarto pages, without making a single allusion to Swinhoe, although this naturalist has said some very interesting things about this goose. In the third place, at the head of his article, he gives references to Swinhoe's writings in the *Ibis* (1860, p. 67 ; 1861, p. 344 ; 1862, p. 253), but omits the reference to *Ibis*, 1867, p. 392. The first three references given contain no information, but the fourth, the omitted one, is the one wherein Swinhoe fully describes *A. serrirostris* for the first and only time. In the fourth place, Mr. Alphéraky receives specimens of a goose from the Anadyr, as already stated, and not a suspicion crosses his mind that they tally with the goose described by Swinhoe.

If Mr. Alphéraky had known of Swinhoe's description of *A. serrirostris*, how can he obstinately hold to the opinion, how could he ever have formed the opinion, that this bean-goose has a yellow bill in life ? He must surely know that nothing can override an original description of a species and that no one is at liberty to alter or qualify it in any respect.

Mr. Buturlin has undertaken the defence of Mr. Alphéraky, but with little success. Referring to my paper he asks in the *Field* :-- " But what is the figure 7 of the same work, named by Mr. Oates *Anser serrirostris*—I cannot guess—most certainly it is not that species." Probably by this time Mr. Buturlin has read Swinhoe's description and has discovered that I have figured the bill correctly. In his communication to our Journal, Mr. Buturlin suggests that Swinhoe is wrong, and he imputes to him a want of sagacity which would be deplorable in a child. He then adopts a very common form of argument and one which perhaps some persons think convincing. He states that he has shot scores and scores of a goose with a yellow bill ; that he has seen numbers of them caught by natives and that he always recorded the colours on the spot. Evidently Mr. Buturlin considers that these experiences fully qualify him to assert positively

that all these geese were *A. serrirostris*. Swinhoe may be thrust aside as of no consequence whatever. Mr. Buturlin further states that Swinhoe's papers are duly recorded by Mr. Alphéraky. I have shewn that the only really important paper of Swinhoe's has been omitted from Mr. Alphéraky's references, and my statement can be verified by any one who looks into the matter.

The second species I propose to deal with is *Anser oatesi*. I complained that Mr. Alphéraky had made no attempt to deal with it, but had dismissed it without remark or comment. He assigned it very doubtfully to *A. neglectus*, a species which there is no ground whatever for believing ever occurs in China or even in any part of Eastern Asia, and which, moreover, has a pink bill, whereas Mr. Rickett states that *A. oatesi*, to the best of his recollection, has a yellow bill. Mr. Alphéraky now states in his pamphlet that Mr. Rickett's description of *A. oatesi* was so vague that he understood at once that something was wrong with it, and he proceeds to quote just a few words of the descriptions as if it were the whole description. Thus quoted, it certainly may be considered very vague, but if my readers will turn to my paper, they will find the description quoted in full and they will hardly consider it unsatisfactory. It contains everything that is essential in the description of a bean-goose.

In my paper, I made a very brief remark about a second specimen of this species in the British Museum. I gave the measurement of the wing and the bill, and that was all. But this is enough to enable Mr. Alphéraky to assert now with absolute certainty that *A. oatesi* is nothing but *A. segetum*.

I need hardly say that *A. oatesi* is a species which has been repeatedly procured by Russian naturalists in its summer quarters in Siberia and that it is well known to Messrs. Alphéraky and Buturlin as *A. serrirostris*. The notes furnished by the latter gentleman, under the heading of *A. oatesi*, in his communication to our Society, render this point no longer doubtful.

The third species I wish to refer to is *A. mentalis*. I complained in my paper that Mr. Alphéraky quoted my description of this species, but, in doing so, suppressed the most essential part of it, viz., the measurement of the wing and the dimensions of the bill. In his pamphlet he thus refers to my complaint:—"Mr. Oates further says that I have not devoted a single line to his original description of *mentalis*."

Misrepresentation such as this makes it difficult to conduct a discussion with Mr. Alphéraky.

A. mentalis is a huge goose with a yellow bill. It differs from *A. serrirostris* not only by reason of the colour of the bill, but by having the bill larger in all its dimensions. It differs from *A. oatesi* by its immensely larger size as exhibited by the body, wing and bill.

I now turn to Mr. Stuart Baker's note, and I am glad that he has been able to identify two of his Indian bean-geese with *A. middendorffi*. I hope he will take steps to have his third specimen properly identified. I note that he asks me to furnish him and other field ornithologists with a key to the bean-geese. I am afraid that no better key is possible than the plate I have given, shewing the bills of all the known species at one glance. I certainly intended the plate to be the key to the species, and I am sorry it is not looked upon as such.

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