

The Bilingual Birder

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

Nothing finer than a fall morning in the desert, and no better way to spend it than with a small band of new birders, their excitement and enthusiasm as catching as catclaw on corduroy. A tiny feathered form lands in the mesquite and eyes us for a split second before resuming its feverish search for prey. Verdin.

A dull one, though, its chestnut wing coverts hidden and with barely a trace of yellow on the head. Quietly I rehearsed with the group the marks that distinguish this from all the other “drab” birds of our desert: the stubby tail and large head; the unmarked face; the short, stout bill; the lax plumage; the obsessive bill-wiping. Nodding, the birders nearest me made their earnest notes, and some even sketched the bird as it fed blithely in front of us. It soon flew on, as Verdins do, and from the back of our group came a squealing shout: “It was so CUTE!”

It most undeniably was. But the author of that honest assessment fell silent under the withering glances of her peers, and blushed in shame at having used a one-syllable word not overly current in the ornithological literature.

Those glances and that blush were unnecessary, inappropriate, wrong. As I thought about the birder’s outburst, it occurred to me that her shout carried exactly the same information as my whispered disquisition: she had noticed



Verdin recte. © Robert Shantz, rshantz.com.

precisely the features I was pointing out, but described them spontaneously in different (maybe better) words—a different language. And so in solidarity, I spoke that language for the rest of the morning, calling up adjectives most of us abandoned long ago as anthropomorphic and unscientific.

It cost me nothing to go native for those few hours, and the group’s next discussion of terms such as auriculars, eyelines, and lores was made easier and, I hope, more memorable when I reminded them of the sweetness of Brewer’s Sparrow, the ferocity of Orange-crowned Warbler, and (perhaps a bit unfairly) the fecklessness of Canyon Towhee.

Language like this may reek of nineteenth-century “birdcraft,” but it speaks more clearly than our tarsi, tomtia, and tertis to new birders and potential birders. To make them feel welcome—and to ensure the survival of birding as we know it—sometimes we all need to be bilingual.

Pelagic Trip Operators! The annual Directory of Pelagic Trips is planned for the January/February 2006 issue of *Winging It*. Please send complete, concise descriptions of pelagic birding opportunities from North American ports to the Editor at winging@aba.org, fax 520 544-7502. Deadline for submission of materials is January 7, 2006.

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