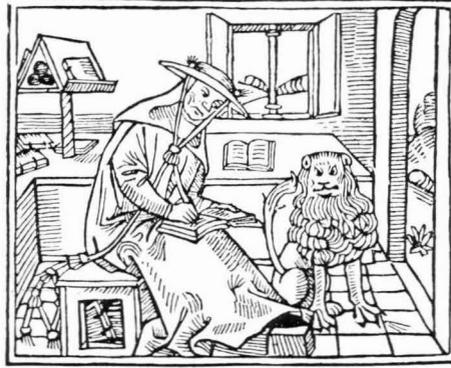


Sometimes all of the criteria for wise book buying are tossed out the window and one buys a book because one can't resist it. Such was the case with a little gem called *A General History of Humming Birds or the Trochilidae with especial reference to the Collection of J. Gould, F.R.S.* It was written by W.C.L. Martin and published in London in 1852. My crafty bookman used the \$60.00 Humming-Bird book to clinch a deal for several more books and considerably more money.

Later, in justification, the qualities of the volume were assessed. First, the most engaging, are the fifteen exquisite color plates, all done by hand. They alone are worth the price of the book. Second, the author was a scientist and officer in the Zoological Society of London. His observations are astute, concise, and reflect the scientific thought of his day. Third, and quite important to me, the book contains a wealth of obscure and trivial details that are unavailable in ordinary research.

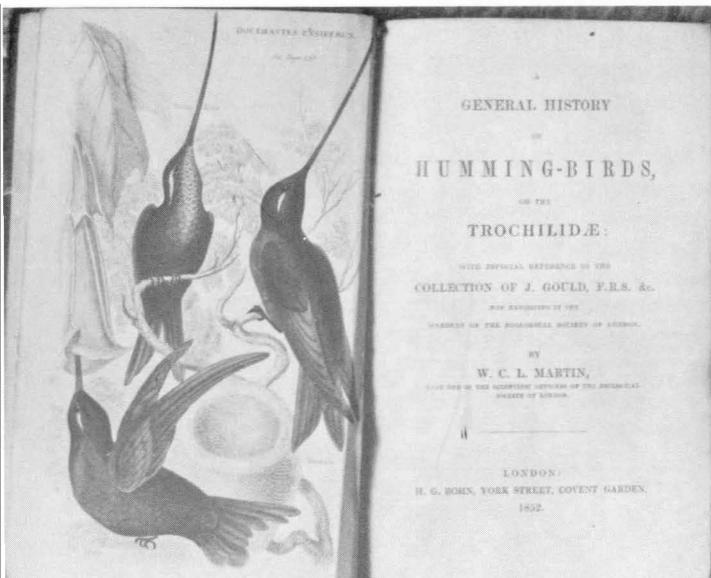
EX LIBRIS



by Sheldon Dingle

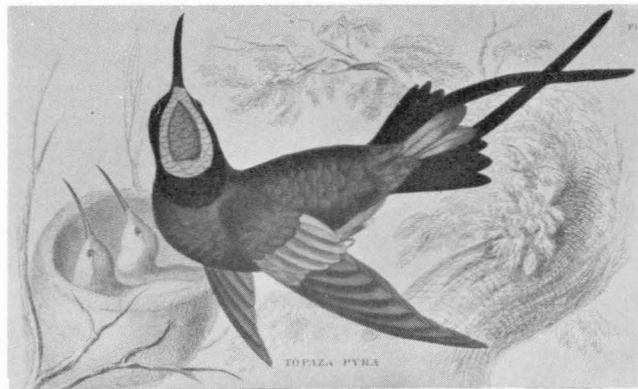
would be a distinct pleasure to review Gould's *Monograph*, but it can be seen, by appointment only, at a few Universities and Museums. While Mr. Martin's book is rather scarce, it is sometimes available.

Of Humming-birds, Mr. Martin says, "So little of these brilliant miniatures of the feathered race is known, in a general and popular sense, that the author of the following pages conceived the idea of a work bearing on their history, — a work at once popular in style and scientific in detail." It is paradoxical that Mr. Martin felt so confident in the scientific knowledge regarding European and Asian birds. He says, "There is not a bird, belong to what order or genus it may, pertaining to Europe... Asia, or even to Africa..."



From a physical standpoint, the book, excepting the plates, is not impressive. It is rather small, measuring 4½ by 7 inches. The cover is dull red, embossed with gold. The 232 pages are gilt-edged, top only. My copy is in good condition, but shows some evidence of wear over the past one hundred twenty-three years. A previous owner has lightly pencilled in the more recent generic and specific names of some of the birds.

Regarding the contents of the book, the author freely explains that it was inspired by the huge collection of Humming-bird skins that John Gould put on display in London. Gould brought from the New World, three hundred species of Humming-birds, most of which had never been seen in Europe. While Gould worked on his massive five volume *Monograph of the Trochilidae*, Mr. Martin completed the delightful little book of our review. It

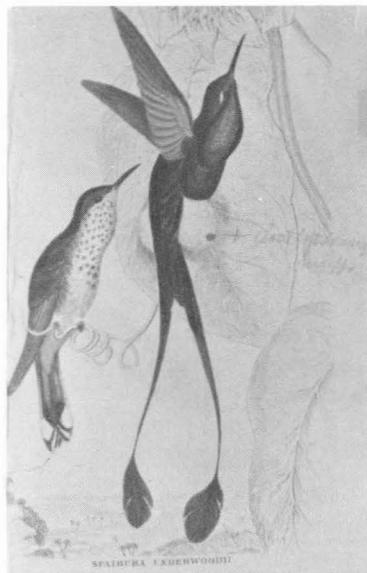


which is not known and described." Of course, we know now that the 1850 mass of scientific knowledge was highly limited. With this background in mind we plunge further into the book. It is divided into two

parts, a general history and descriptions of the genera and species. The general history is not divided into chapters, but the contents of each page are identified at the page top. Flipping through this section one sees page headings, such as Classification, Natural Enemies, Voice and Song, Metallic Plumage, Nidification, Preservation in Captivity, Ancient Mexicans, Animal Heat, Electric Influence, and many others equally intriguing.

We won't dwell upon the genera and species at all. That sort of catalogue can be obtained in several places. Many of the personal observations and digressions, on the other hand, are to be found nowhere else. A few examples will give you an idea how interesting this small book is.

First off, Mr. Martin dispels a popular



myth regarding tropical spiders, that are so large, they catch birds. He refers to the spiders of genus *Mygale* when he says, "Several and enormous species exist in Cuba [but] cannot possibly catch birds because it spins no net. . . and finally, because *Mygale* is in itself too inactive in its motions. . . to be able to get near a Humming-bird which, as far as I have seen, never perches except on branches." There are six pages dealing with spider lore and reflecting it to Humming-birds.

In another very interesting passage Martin relates how a female Mango Humming-bird, sitting upon two eggs, was captured with the nest. She hatched the eggs on shipboard during passage from Jamaica to England. The hen died shortly thereafter, but the two babies were delivered to London, where they survived about two months. Martin says that it is not possible to preserve Humming-birds in captivity. Fortunately, our modern technology has overcome many of the problems of Martin's time and it is now possible to rear some Humming-birds in aviaries.

He refers to the intelligence of the small birds saying, "... the intelligence of these tiny beings is manifested in their inquisitiveness; if struck at as they dart along. . . they will hover around the aggressor, peer closely into his face, or

examine the instrument designed for their capture."

Martin explains a theory that suggests that thickly insulated nests of the Humming-birds are designed to protect eggs and babies from the extreme static electricity often present in tropical thunder storms.

There are one hundred twenty seven pages of this marvelous commentary about Humming-birds. Some of it is fallacious. Some of it is extremely accurate. All of it is delightful.

If you ever have an opportunity to purchase or even examine this wonderful little book, by all means do so. The color plates alone are worth it, and even without the plates, the text is so original and engaging as to insure your reward. ■

SILVERBILL Cont'd from pg 23

ed Silverbill" for *Odontospiza (Lonchura) canicaps* would seem misleading, therefore, because it implies a close relationship to the Silverbills (*Euodice*), I propose the name "Pearl-headed Mannikin" for this distinctive estrildid, a name similar to the German "Perlhalsamadine".

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Drs. Klaus Immelmann, Ned K. Johnson, and my wife, Joyce, for their

comments on the manuscript, and Mr. and Mrs. John A. Thomas for all the patience and effort in photographing my birds.

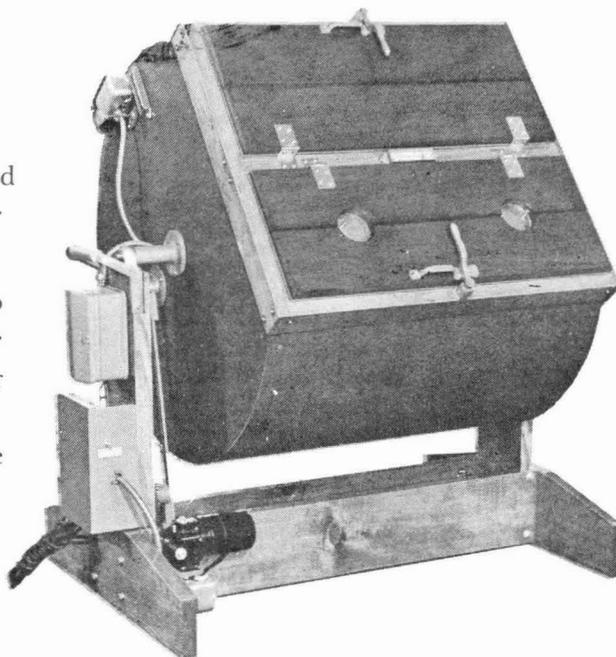
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