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An Unfortunate Name - With a Nebraska Twist

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The past days have seen an amusing conversation about bird names conducted on the online discussion group NEBirds - just the sort of thing to get us through these dog-day afternoons of August. A very sharp young birder has brought

up the case of the Paltry Tyrannulet, a cute little tropical flycatcher whose English name seems determined to add insult to diminutive injury.

In a fascinating bit of serendipity, this onomastically maligned bird, resident from Mexico south through Central America to Colombia, in fact has a Nebraska connection. Described 150 years ago in the genus *Elainia*, the tyrannulet was quickly renamed *Tyranniscus vilissimus*, and it bore that name until 1977, when the late Melvin Traylor - himself memorialized in the name of the Orange-eyed Flatbill *Tolmomyias traylori* - erected a new genus for this and another almost dozen species.

Traylor named his new genus *Zimmerius*, in honor of the great and little-remembered American ornithologist John Todd Zimmer. Born in Ohio in 1889, Zimmer and his family moved to Nebraska in the early years of the twentieth century, and he graduated from the University of Nebraska one hundred years ago this year; he took the M.A. there in 1911, and was granted the D.Sc. *honoris causa* in 1943. Like others I could name, Zimmer spent much of his college time outside looking for birds and inside looking at birds, and he eventually left a large and very fine collection of skins to the University of Nebraska State Museum, where they still reside.

Zimmer left Nebraska to hold positions in the Philippines and New Guinea, then moved to the Field Museum and finally to the American Museum, where he spent nearly thirty years working on the birds of the Neotropics, particularly Peru. The naming of *Zimmerius* recognizes his contribution to the taxonomy of South American birds, cited by the Brewster Medal Committee in 1952 as "truly the foundation for the work of all other current students of the South American avifauna."

Unfortunately, when Sclater and Salvin christened the Paltry Tyrannulet in 1859, they gave it the specific epithet *vilissimus*, the superlative of the Latin adjective *vilis*, meaning (as its English descendant "vile" would suggest) "contemptible, worthless, ordinary, vulgar," a reflection of both the bird's abundance and its relatively undistinguished appearance. With Traylor's revision, though, the species' current scientific name, *Zimmerius vilissimus*, joins the epithet to a person's name - giving us a translation something like "the very contemptible Zimmer." The fact that the species is polytypic makes it even worse: the nominate subspecies, *Z. v. vilissimus*, is "the very, very contemptible Zimmer."

Surely not what Traylor wanted to say, but such things happen in the world of birds and words.

The biographical details in this note are from Murphy, R.C., and D. Amadon. 1959. "In Memoriam: John Todd Zimmer." The Auk 76: 418-423. The taxonomic history of the Paltry Tyrannulet can be reviewed in The AOU Check-list of North American Birds, 7th ed., 1998; Traylor's revision was published in Traylor, M.A. 1977. "A Classification of the Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae)." Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology 148: 129-184.