The greatest label story in the history of science is, as it happens, the story of an orphan. Out in the home county of Hertfordshire, in the village of Tring, in a red brick manse constructed by Lionel Walter (the second baron of Rothschild), lives the ornithological collection of the Natural History Museum of London—though maybe “lives” is not the right word for a vast mausoleum of the feathered tribe. In one of the many ranks of musty roller trays secreted in this bird temple has lain for more than a century a very, very dead specimen of *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, a small and unremarkable finch-like creature more generally known as the American bobolink. Like most of the other stuffed birds in the collection, this little shuttlecock wears the sad look of a punched-out boxer and sports a few labels tied to its trussed legs like mortuary toe tags. These labels, in fact—of which more in a moment.

This particular bird had the distinction to have chirruped loudly and risen sharply from the ground in mid-October 1835, while resident on James Island (now Santiago) in the Galapagos—an action that, repeated several times, brought him or her to the attention of Harry Fuller, steward to Captain Robert FitzRoy (of the *Beagle*) and at that moment accompanying the captain’s friend Charles Darwin, who was then engaged in shot-shooting specimens on the low-flood of the archipelago. Fuller, in the service of his betters, dropped the critter and bagged it, starting it on a new trajectory: the rest of its annual migration from the prairies of North America down to the grasslands of the Pampas would not happen. Instead, this immature bobolink—gutted, washed with arsenic soap, sprinkled with a dash of corrosive sublimate, and wadded with dry grass—would abruptly veer westward and cross the Pacific in the company of the twenty-eight-year-old Darwin, eventually finding a new home as a cadaver in the British Isles.

This might seem, on the face of it, the very antithesis of being orphaned—since the process of becoming a natural history specimen is rather more like a violently disruptive adoption. But this juvenile bobolink had the misfortune to have been shot by a pair of mediocre ornithologists who took it to be something considerably more exotic than it was. And therefore when, back in London, Darwin handed it over to the able Victorian bird expert John Gould, this gentleman pretty promptly worked out that the somewhat drab-plumaged tweet was not a heretofore unknown Galapagos pipit, but merely a familiar *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. So instead of taking up its throne in what would become, over the next twenty years, one of the most famous and important collections of birds ever made—Charles Darwin’s Galapagos specimens, including all the finches and mockingbirds that would become the storied point of departure for his theory of evolution—this defenestrated bobolink suffered the indignity of being cast into the natural-historical outer darkness known as “scientific irrelevance,” where it was shuffled about as a kind of surplus item from collection to collection, a dead bird of no importance.
But with label 372 in hand, Sulloway was in a position to reveal the whole history of Darwin's efforts to sort out just which of his Galápagos birds came from which island. And the result was clear: Because when you really looked closely, the entire business had unfolded almost entirely the other way around. It was only after Darwin had begun to suspect that species might not be immutable that he began to try reconstituting the biographies of his finches, and through his trials he carried little ledgers, putting over his field notes and asking around for help from his shipmates—none of whom were members also collected in the process he displayed a marked tendency to try up his bird-location facts in a way that supported his emergent suspicion about evolutionary processes. Oops! Any of you constructed-reasoners reading this who are not

to figure out how to tell your friends about how Darwin made up all the stuff about the finches and flushed out the evidence for evolution: Forget it. Darwin's finches are a magnificent microcosm of adaptive radiation, considerably better than the joke, as it worked out. And evolution is real, baby, so get used to the idea.

The point of all this, of course, to "catch Darwin out," but rather to reveal the weird world in which phylo-historical legacies work.
Oological Tags

In 1976, a mutually beneficial agreement was reached between the Oakland Museum of California and the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology to trade collections of oological specimens, or bird’s eggs. The specimen tags pictured here, dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, came from the collection of California-native bird’s eggs received by the Oakland Museum of California. Containing a wide variety of penmanship, typesetting, and cryptic museological markings, these tags are in many ways just as remarkable a collection of specimens as the eggs to which they relate.

— Chris Fitzpatrick

fig. 54

fig. 55

fig. 56

fig. 57

fig. 58

fig. 59

fig. 60

fig. 61