

The Emu

Official Organ of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union.

"Birds of a feather."

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[PART I.

The Australasian Ornithologists' Union.

ITS ORIGIN.

IN after years reminiscences of the beginnings of successful societies possess a special interest. But too often, when the history of what time proves to be an important event comes to be written, material is either unavailable or only procured with difficulty. Hence it may not be unwise to reverse the usual order of things, and even before the first general gathering of the Aust. O.U. in Adelaide, to "take time by the forelock," in this first issue of *The Emu*, by giving an outline of the inception of the Union and the steps which led to the formation of so necessary an institution.

The initial stages took the form of a series of ornithological and oological dinners or reunions, delightful socials at which nothing stronger than tea and coffee was drunk. The first was held on 15th August, 1896, and the only record is the following account given by a newspaper:—

REUNION OF NATURALISTS.

At the invitation of Mr. A. J. Campbell, about 20 naturalists* met at a reunion at Britannia House, South Yarra, on Saturday evening. There were present:—Mr. D. M'Alpine, Government Pathologist (in the chair), Dr. Charles Ryan, Mr. Dudley Le Souëf, and several members of the Field Naturalists' Club and others who take interest principally in the oology or nidification of Australian birds. The floral decorations of the table were in strict keeping with the occasion, consisting of golden blooms of acacias, native heaths, pink and white. A large and beautiful moss-made nest of the Mountain or Ground Thrush, with eggs, fresh from the scrub, adorned the centre of the table. Mr. M'Alpine said that Mr. Campbell had been naturalizing for 25 years. His egg collection had reached 500 species—the largest purely Australian collection of eggs extant. Mr. M'Alpine referred to the instructive articles by Mr. Campbell appearing in *The Australasian*, and said he hoped that when Mr. Campbell published his permanent work (now in course of preparation) he would receive national assistance. In lieu of the usual toasts, Mr. Campbell read a paper touching on ornithological topics, describing some of his experiences as a field naturalist, and

* Those actually present were:—H. P. C. Ashworth, T. A. Brittlebank, F. G. A. Barnard, A. J. Campbell, W. R. G. Campbell, T. G. Campbell, A. G. Campbell, Ed. Degen, C. French, jun., J. Gabriel, J. T. Gillespie, Robt. Hall, D. Le Souëf, D. M'Alpine, Chas. Ryan, G. E. Shepherd, and J. Sommers.



(PHOTOGRAPHED FROM THE LE SOUEF TESTIMONIAL.)

giving an account of the Bell Miner. The paper was followed by an exhibition of lantern views depicting birds and nests seen by Mr. Campbell during his excursions. Before breaking up the meeting resolved to form an Australian Ornithological Union, on similar lines to the British and American Ornithological Unions.

A return dinner was given at the Victoria Coffee Palace on 26th August, 1897. About the same number of gentlemen were present as in the previous year, amongst them being Dr. Chas. Ryan, Dr. Snowball, Mr. E. D'Ombraïn, and other field naturalists. Mr. T. A. Brittlebank and Mr. G. E. Shepherd were present on behalf of provincial collectors, while the intercolonial ones were represented by Mr. A. E. Brent, of Tasmania. Apologies regretting absence were received from Sir Frederick M'Coy, Colonel W. V. Legge, and others. Mr. Campbell, replying to the toast of his health, made the prophetic utterance—"It is a very happy thought to make these reunions of ours annual affairs. If we keep them going no doubt they will merge into an Australian Ornithological Union at no distant date."* Lantern views of birds, nests, and eggs, and an exhibition of some of the rarest and most beautiful eggs, filled up a pleasant and profitable evening.

There was a lapse of two years ere the next gathering took place, at the Coffee Palace, on the 1st September, 1899. This was at the invitation of Mr. Dudley Le Souëf. The return dinner, on 7th November, 1900, was an unqualified success, and at it the preliminaries of a union had a definite beginning. Apologies were read from Sir Malcolm M'Eacharn, Mr. C. W. De Vis (Queensland), Mr. S. W. Moore, M.L.A. (New South Wales), Dr. Morgan (South Australia), Colonel Legge (Tasmania), Mr. C. French (Government Entomologist), and others. There were present—Dr. Chas. Ryan (in the chair), Mr. J. W. Mellor (representing the Ornithological Association of South Australia), Mr. C. F. Belcher (Field Naturalists' Club, Geelong), Mr. D. M'Alpine, and several other prominent members of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria—in all 21 gentlemen.† (By a remarkable coincidence, this was the exact number of the founders of the now famous American Ornithologists' Union, started in 1883.) It was resolved that Dr. Ryan, Messrs. D. Le Souëf, A. J. Campbell, G. A. Keartland, Robt. Hall, and J. Gabriel form a committee to consider the matter of a union fully, and bring up at an early date the result of its deliberations. This committee went to work, slowly but surely, with the encouraging result that sufficient responses (including the gracious patronage of Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York) were received to warrant the committee in recommending that a union be constituted from the 1st July, 1901, with its principal planks the study and protection of birds, and that the first general meeting be held at Adelaide in October

* *The Wombat*, Oct., 1897, p. 6.

† Signatures see Plate I.

following, when a simple code of rules and a representative list of office-bearers be proposed for adoption.

FUTURE WORK.

Already the membership roll includes workers whose names are known beyond Australasia, and though the Union is not confined to men who have made so prominent a mark, but includes ordinary bird-lovers as well as scientific ornithologists and oologists (this was necessary to secure the diffusion of knowledge), it should do excellent work. None will deny that there is a wide field to engage the attention of such a body, or that there is much to be done both in the field and the cabinet. There are technicalities to be settled, doubtful points to be cleared up, and mysteries of nesting, &c., to solve. Our knowledge of bird life is incomplete; it is probable that many new species remain to be discovered; and some of the genera are in danger of passing away altogether unless something is done to save them. The efforts of isolated workers cannot be so effective in such a cause as if all interested acknowledge their undoubted interdependence and combine to render mutual aid, to correct one another's observations, deductions, or plans by the light of their own experience, and to assist in the common cause.

The Australasian Union has a very similar task before it to that which the American Union had, and surely there is no reason why it should not achieve as good results. It ought to be possible to write of our Union, when it has been as long established, in language like that employed by Dr. J. A. Allen, the first president of the American Ornithologists' Union, sixteen years after that body had been formed. What he says emphasizes the need of united action, and shows what can be accomplished by it.

"Between isolated workers in any field, jealousies and misunderstandings arise, which personal contact tends to obliterate. Such was the case with our ornithologists for some years prior to the founding of the Union. There were two rival check lists of North American birds, each, perhaps, equally authoritative, though differing in important details, which led to confusion and a tendency to array our ornithologists into two hostile camps. This being recognized as a threatening evil of considerable gravity, one of the first acts of the Union was to appoint a committee on the classification and nomenclature of North American birds, so constituted as to include the most competent authorities on the subject and at the same time safeguard all conflicting interests. The work of this committee long since became a matter of history. It was conducted with the utmost conscientiousness and care; personal interests and personal bias were generously waived; differences of opinion were settled by appeals to facts and the evidence, with the result that agreement was established in respect to all points of nomenclature and other technicalities, and a new impetus given to systematic investigation. Thus, through the work of this committee alone, one of the primary objects in view in founding this Union was most happily accomplished."

After alluding to such important matters as "Bird Migration,"

"The Sparrow Pest," &c., Dr. Allen mentions that at the second congress of the Union it appointed a Committee on Protection of North American Birds, which has been continued to the present time, and has been an influence for good in this great economic and humanitarian work.

In the important matter of bird protection there is a great task before the Australasian Union. The Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria has done some good work locally from time to time. The Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science promised to be a larger sphere of usefulness in this direction. But possibly it has "too many irons in the fire," and the meetings only once every two years are not conducive to the continuous efforts needed for effective bird protection. At the Association's first (Sydney) session, 1887, a paper was read on "The Protection of Native Birds" (*vide* vol. i., p. 338), and Professor Baldwin Spencer secured the appointment of a committee to consider and investigate the question (page 33). The committee was reconstructed at the following (Melbourne) session, and brought up its recommendations (amended and approved by the Council) at Adelaide, 1893 (*vide* vol. v., p. 241, 242). But although eight years have passed since then, nothing practically has been done, except to carry out the one relating to the preparation of a systematic list of vernacular names for Australian birds, which was adopted at Sydney (1898) and published in vol. vii., pp. 128-154.

Probably one of the first acts of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union will be to start where the Adelaide Committee of the Australasian Science Association left off—namely, with the recommendations, which for the most part are these:—

- (1.) That close reserves, controlled by local honorary trustees, and supported by Government grants, should be proclaimed.
- (2.) That the existing game laws should be strictly enforced.
- (3.) That in all *Game Acts* provisions should be made for the proclamation of districts, comprising both Crown lands and private property, wherein particular species may be absolutely protected for indefinite periods.
- (4.) That special legislation should be introduced in all the states to provide for the protection of animals of economic value or particular biological interest.
- (5.) That a standing committee of local naturalists should be appointed in each State to deal with the protection of the native fauna.

All this cannot be accomplished at once, and it must ever be remembered that ornithologists and bird-lovers will have to "hammer, hammer, hammer" at some very apathetic skulls before due protection is achieved. The public must first be roused, then never be permitted to ignore the desired result.

The Union would achieve much, to commence with, if it only

got (No. 2) the existing *Game Laws* strictly enforced and *brought into line*, so that it may no longer be lawful to shoot, say, ducks on the left-hand bank of the Murray (Victoria) up to the end of July, and then to shoot on the right-hand bank (N.S.W.) for a month later. Obviously close seasons in similar localities should be assimilated.

"THE EMU."

The Emu (with the motto "Birds of a feather") is intended to be "an outward and visible sign" of union, and should prove of value in the good cause. It will provide a recognized means of intercommunication between all interested in ornithology, whatever their branch of that study may be, and afford all an opportunity of recording facts and valuable observations, and of giving publicity to those and their own deductions. Thus bird students will be kept in touch with one another, original study will be aided, and an Australasian want supplied.

It will be noticed that, despite the fact that Professors A. Newton and R. Lydekker prefer "Emeu" in their "Dictionary of Birds," it has been decided, with all due deference to those eminent authorities, to adopt the common Australian spelling of "Emu" in the title of this magazine. The reasons are, briefly, that this form of the word has been in use since 1774, is adopted by the new English Historical Dictionary, given as correct by Professor Morris in his "Australian English," and used by most of the standard authorities. It has also been embodied in the vernacular list of the Australasian Science Association, and is generally recognized as correct throughout Australia, where Emeu and its variant Emew are almost unknown. These grounds should be sufficient to stand upon, but, as kindly pointed out by Mr. T. S. Hall, M.A., there is the further consideration that Emeus is the title of an extinct genus of New Zealand struthious birds, and that when it became necessary to allude to members of the Dromæidæ in the plural, as Emeus, confusion might be caused. In conclusion, it may be mentioned that in the endeavour to get the fullest light on the subject an appeal was made to Professor Tucker, Litt. D., who so ably fills the chair of Classics and Philology at the Melbourne University, as to whether there was any classical origin for the word. His answer was that it has "no well-ascertained derivation," and that Emeu (through the current form in olden times) "was only a way of representing the same sound as in Emu (E-myoo), and from the phonetic point of view each is incorrect. . . . The question reduces itself to this—'Shall we adopt an old, phonetically incorrect, and rather unsettled spelling; or shall we adopt a spelling which, while phonetically incorrect also, has become usual, is rather neater in shape, and appears free from pedantry?' . . . I should say 'Emu.'" If *The Emu* sins as to the orthography of its name, which seems hardly probable, it will not be without justification.