

The Use of Scientific Bird Names.

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IN *The Emu* for October last I notice a communication in *re* the use of common bird names. To some this matter may seem of little importance, but when we consider that it affects the value of our records I think it will be admitted that the subject deserves our attention. The subject, one in which I have taken considerable interest, was discussed in *The Condor* a couple of years ago, and perhaps a few remarks from an American may be of interest to your readers.

When the A.O.U. formulated its code and worked out the North American "Check-List" there was adopted a list of English bird names along with the scientific ones. In the case of the latter class of names the list has been a great boon to bird students in the United States, especially to the beginner. Unfortunately the A.O.U., with the best intent, no doubt, changed many of the English names in common use, substituting for them names more appropriate, perhaps; but these new names have had a hard time to hold their own. Unfortunately these changes were made in the names of many common and well-known species. Mr. Hill asks if there is anyone anywhere who calls the Laughing Jackass Brown Kingfisher (*Emu*, iii., p. 139). We have the same feeling with regard to the changes made in American bird names. With sincere loyalty to the A.O.U. we tried to remember that the California Quail should be called a Partridge; that the Snow-Bird is a Junco; the Turkey-Buzzard a Vulture; the Rosy Finch a *Leucosticte*, &c. But there has been a growing tendency among writers in the United States to drop back to the old names or to coin new ones. It may be admitted that we *should* be able to have fixed common names, but for all that common names, with us at least, are very apt to be equivocal.

I will here quote part of a letter from Dr. C. Hart Merriam, one of our leading American systematists:—"Your inquiry with respect to the A.O.U. tendency in common names gives me an opportunity to state that I place no weight whatever on the fact of the adoption or rejection of a particular name, or form of name, among the common names of birds as used in the A.O.U. Check-List. In other words, my position is, and always has been, that the A.O.U. ruling on points of scientific nomenclature should carry great weight, but that in matters of common English names of species every man is at liberty to use whatever name he pleases. Whatever one's views may be on this matter, the fact remains that so large a number of writers do use common names different from those in the code that it is absolutely necessary in many cases to give the scientific name if the record is of any value" (*Condor*, iii., p. 52).

Unquestionably the fact that birds have been supplied so

generously with common names has greatly popularized their study. But trivial names are inaccurate, and the wider the territory over which they are used the more inaccurate they become. For instance, the name Yellow-hammer in England means a Bunting (*Emberiza*), in the United States it refers to a Woodpecker (*Colaptes*). Similar curiosities of nomenclature occur with regard to Blackbird, Warbler, Flycatcher, and others. At the same time there are hundreds of birds for which we have no names other than the scientific ones. The latter we must know and should use if we wish to be exact. The common name may be useful over a limited area, but it becomes useless as this area widens, as stated above, while the scientific name has a value any and everywhere. For example, I see the name Mistletoe-Bird in *The Emu*. Now this conveys to me no idea whatever, but as I see it belongs to the genus *Dicaeum* I am able to locate it. Working with my native collectors I find that they learn the scientific names much more readily than they would English names. True, the natives here have names for many birds, but these are seldom of more than generic value.

I am well aware that a general narrative article cluttered with scientific names makes a bad appearance and smacks of pedantry, but this may be avoided by giving the list of scientific names at the end of the article, together with the trivial equivalents. In a faunal list, however, the scientific names must always be used, with or without the common ones as the author may fancy.

I am glad to see that *The Emu* prints names of species dedicated to persons without the "'s," a system, which is, I believe, fast finding favour among American scientists.

In conclusion, I can do no better than to quote the following pertinent words from Mr. Robert Ridgway, Curator of Birds in the Smithsonian Institution, and the highest authority in America on systematic ornithology:—"No reasonable person can make serious or well-founded objection to the use of vernacular names in such publications [popular or semi-popular bird books and journals], but since there are evidently some who regard scientific names as wholly superfluous I desire to present one good reason why the latter should *always* be given, whether accompanied by the vernacular name or not.

"So far as I am aware, no one has yet desired a better index to the literature of a particular species than a carefully prepared 'synonymy,' by which I mean not only the various synonyms themselves but also judiciously selected references under each, arranged in chronological or some other methodical sequence. For several years past the collation of references for such a synonymy of the birds of North and Middle America has occupied a very considerable portion of my time, during which there have been numerous occasions to deplore the absence of the scientific name in connection with some note which records a new fact of geographic distribution, habits, or nidifi-

cation. Necessarily, these have had to be passed by, since vernacular names are unavailable for citation.

"It may be urged that vernacular names are citable as well as scientific names. While this is in one sense true, nevertheless it is impracticable, unless the compiler is willing to double his labour and add unnecessarily to the bulk of his book. In other words, since scientific names *must*, for various paramount reasons, be cited, the addition of vernacular names would but increase the labour of the compiler and still further complicate the topography of the synonymy. . . .

"Personally, I am in favour of the use of vernacular names; but by all means let us have the scientific names also" (*Condor*, ii., p. 41).

Stray Feathers.

INCUBATION AFTER REMOVAL FROM THE NEST.—During the breeding season of 1903 a nest of the Hoary-headed Grebe (*Podiceps poliocephalus*) was found by some friends of mine about 20 miles from Casterton. It contained one egg, and was taken to be sent on to me. The specimen was not blown, and after it had laid in the house for a couple of days a chick within was heard chipping. The egg was kept warm until hatched, and the young replaced in the nest. Soon afterwards the chick was seen, accompanied by its proud mother, swimming about the swamp. Miss Carmichael, who informed me of this, said it was hot weather at the time, but that no special attention was paid to the egg in order to facilitate its incubation.—(DR.) E. A. D'OMBRAIN. Casterton (V.), 18/4/04.

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YELLOW-RUMPED FINCH (*Munia flaviprymna*).—A pair of these bright little birds are in the Melbourne Zoological Gardens, and are just at present busily constructing a bulky dome-shaped nest of grass. The male is of a richer hue than the female; his breast is pale chestnut, back and wings rich dark chestnut, especially on the shoulders; his rump is reddish-yellow, and the tail feathers dark chestnut, with the outer edge of a much lighter hue, the two central feathers have a dark centre and light on each side; all the tail feathers are pointed; top of head and neck greyish-fawn, the centre of each feather slightly darkened, and only indistinctly discernible; just over and below the eye a much lighter shade, almost white; vent white; bill and legs blue. They are altogether very neat and trim little birds in appearance, and seem fairly hardy. This pair came from North-Western Australia, inland from Cossack.—D. LE SOUËF. 11/3/04.

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SWIFTS AND SWALLOWS.—This autumn has been remarkable for the number of times the Spine-tailed Swift (*Chaetura cauda-*