

1922, pp. 341-410, May. 1922.)—A remarkably good list very fully annotated with accounts of habits, dates of occurrence etc. [In French.]

**van Someren, V. G. L.** On a collection of Birds from Turkanaland. (Jour. East African and Uganda Nat. Hist. Soc., No. 16, February, 1921, pp. 3-38.)—A list of 186 species, in English, with long English names coined for each form; as for instance, for *Linura fischeri*, "Fischer's Straw-tailed Whydah." It is not clear what benefit is derived from such cumbersome appellations which have no actual usage.

**Chappellier, Albert** A Contribution to the Study of Hybridism in Birds. (Suppl. Bull. Biol. France et Belg. IV. 1921.) [In French.]

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## CORRESPONDENCE

### Generic Subdivision.

Editor of 'THE AUK':

The following statement was circulated with the covering letter which precedes it, amongst the leading systematic research workers of the A. O. U, with the exception of the members of the Committee on Nomenclature for whose information the expression of opinion was solicited. The widespread desire for a generously appreciable value to the generic unit and of providing for finer classification by a liberal use of subgenera is very apparent.

While everyone whose name appears, has approved the principles proposed some have made minor reservations and suggested alteration of phraseology all of which are indicated so that the statement as it stands is an exact reflection of current opinion in this country.

P. A. TAVERNER.

Ottawa, Ont., Jan. 18th, 1922.

Dear Sir:—

Many view with alarm the present tendency towards minute division of the genus. It promises to complicate nomenclature and taxonomy until each group becomes the private preserve of individual specialists who alone have time to follow its intricacies within their narrowed field. It is making a large part of our literature obsolete in terminology and raising difficulties in the way of both present and future students, some of whom think that there is something more to do in zoology than the making or learning of names. It has had another effect, more subtle but perhaps of even greater danger to ornithology. It discourages the dilettante. This cuts off the supply of future ornithologists at its source and deprives the serious student of the sympathetic interest and assistance of the general public. Investigators cannot live long in the rarified atmosphere of pure science regardless of the temperament of the community below

that furnishes support or encouragement. We are feeling this more every day.

It is recognized that there is no limit to knowledge and that advancement must continually be made. That new light is constantly being thrown upon the relationship of species is recognized and our taxonomy must show many readjustments. If the method under criticism were the only way of accomplishing this there would be no question as to the proper procedure for truth must stand before all things in science. If, however, there is a way of expressing the utmost refinements of classification without this very evident confusion is it not the course of wisdom and to the benefit of science to follow it?

While it is admittedly impossible to formulate an exact definition of such an elusive concept as a genus or to enforce its acceptance when formulated, it does seem that principles might be formed that may at least discourage extreme departures from a generalized ideal.

In informally discussing the subject with a number of leaders in American ornithological thought it was evident that there is an appreciable body of opinion favourable to these views yet that opinion has been nearly voiceless and, judging by current literature, our Committee on Nomenclature and the general public both at home and abroad might be justified in concluding that the practice met with general approval. Such protests as have been made have been received with the silence that may indicate either disapproval or consent.

In order therefore that an opinion on the subject may be expressed the writer has taken the liberty of preparing what seems to him a fair and restrained presentation of the case. He proposes to circulate it amongst the leading ornithologists of both schools, requesting an expression of opinion. It may then be presented for the guidance of our Committee on Nomenclature in their revision of the 'Check List,' published as a symposium, or both.

It is suggested that this is a matter in which the younger men are especially interested. It raises a question of pure expediency, not of science, and they are equally as capable of judging it as the oldest and grayest systematist. Those who in the future will use the tools now being forged are certainly entitled to as much voice in their construction as those who are nearing the time when they will drop them forever.

I would therefore request you to read the inclosed carefully, attach any opinion you may form on it and return to the writer with the above objects in view. If you have nothing to add or subtract from the inclosure a signature at the bottom will suffice.

Sincerely,

(Sgd.) P. A. TAVERNER.

Victoria Memorial Museum,  
Ottawa, Ont.

### The Genus Debased.

The Genus has two objects in our current usage. One is nomenclatural, the other taxonomic.

In Nomenclature it forms a part of the name of the species and by indicating a group of which the species named is a member, assists in recalling its general position in our classification. This, when the groups are sufficiently generalized, it does very well indeed.

In Taxonomy, it is a group of species bearing a certain more or less fundamental degree of resemblance to each other and distinct from other similar groups. It endeavours to express a natural relationship based upon common evolutionary descent. This, due to the incompleteness<sup>1</sup> of our knowledge, is<sup>2</sup> very imperfectly accomplished.

Whatever<sup>3</sup> the theory may be, in practice the genus is little more than an arbitrary grouping for convenience. It has no demonstrable foundation in fact. Its value relative to the family on one hand and the species on the other is purely conventional, and is a matter of expediency and not of scientific fact.

It is undeniable that the value of the genus has been consistently<sup>4</sup> and progressively lowered since it was first established. The original Linnaean genus was but little less than the family as recognized today and we have debased it until tomorrow it promises to be but little more than a species.<sup>5</sup> When a<sup>6</sup> large number of genera become monotypic the advantage of the binomial system is lost and the principles of its inventor ignored. In fact in such cases the generic name might almost as well be abandoned altogether for all the assistance it offers in placing a species within our system of classification.

The spirit of the binomial system is broken if not the letter. That some species are less closely related than we formerly supposed is an important fact and should not be lost sight of, but it does not seem that the creation of a large number of small or monotypic genera is the only or the best way of commemorating it. The chief result of such a course is the degradation of the genus and the complication of nomenclature. It obscures the larger more important facts of likeness behind a multitude of smaller less important ones of dissimilarity.

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<sup>1</sup> "It is the completeness of our knowledge that makes generic treatment difficult,"—remark by Frank M. Chapman.

<sup>2</sup> "sometimes" inserted by Frank M. Chapman.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph deleted by W. deW. Miller, James P. Chapin and Frank M. Chapman. The following alternate paragraph offered by Miller and Chapin,—

"In theory the genus is a group intermediate between the species and the subfamily. As it approaches one or the other of these in comprehensiveness, its usefulness diminishes. Its exact limits must usually be a matter of personal opinion, but expediency forbids reducing it nearly to the value of a single species, unless this species be extremely divergent from any of its allies."

<sup>4</sup> "Inconsistently" offered in place of "consistently" by Frank M. Chapman.

<sup>5</sup> Omit from here to end of first sentence in next paragraph,—C. Hart Merriam.

<sup>6</sup> "Very" inserted by W. deW. Miller.

However the current lowering of generic value may permit of the expression of finer relationship, it certainly is not in the direction of simplicity or convenience but promises in time to involve us in a maze of words and to reduce ornithology to a study of language not of birds. The question is, is it wise to persist in this direction when other ways are open?

It is obvious that different workers require different scales of measurement. The carpenter works to an eighth of an inch, the cabinet maker to a sixty-fourth, whilst the optician measures to one ten-thousandth. In the same way the zoological specialist requires a much finer scale of measurement than the generalist, but it is no more advisable to involve the latter in the minute refinements of the former than it is to insist on the carpenter using the same measurement units as the maker of optical instruments.

When we discovered that species were not fine enough taxonomic units to express all our facts we did not lower the value of the species, or if we did we quickly corrected our error, but we turned to the subspecies for finer definitions. In doing so we may have broken the letter of the binomial system but we did keep its spirit. Is not this case of the genus a parallel case? Why cannot we agree to allow the genus a substantial and easily appreciated value and express the finer divisions demanded by the specialist in subgenera? The fact that the sub-generic name may or may not be used in specific nomenclature at the discretion or need of the individual worker gives a flexibility that should satisfy all requirements. We can have a simple nomenclature for the generalizer and yet possibilities of the utmost refinement for the specialist without confusion to either.

Signatures.

R. M. Anderson	J. Eugene Law
Outram Bangs	F. A. Lucas
A. C. Bent	Joseph Mailliard
L. B. Bishop	*W. deW. Miller
*James P. Chapin	Loye Miller
*Frank M. Chapman	Robert Cushman Murphy
W. Lee Chambers	*C. Hart Merriam
Donald R. Dickey	John Treadwell Nichols
Barton Warren Evermann	Chas. H. Rogers
J. Grinnell	A. Van Rossem
Ludlow Griscom	Guy C. Rieh
A. B. Howell	H. S. Swarth
Lawrence M. Huey	Tracy I. Storer
C. E. Hellmayr	W. E. Clyde Todd.

Wilfred H. Osgood and Richard C. McGregor expressed approval of the sentiments and referred to their published statements on the subject, but did not sign.<sup>1</sup>

\* Exceptions taken or suggestions or amendments offered over these signatures, as expressed in the footnotes.

<sup>1</sup>Revision of the Genus *Peromyscus*, by W. H. Osgood, N. Am. Fauna No. 28, pp. 24-26, and *Genera and Species* by Richard McGregor, Condor XXIII, pp. 127-129, July, 1921.