

GENERAL NOTES

The family name of the Australian Honey-eaters.—The honey-eaters were known for almost one hundred years under the name Meliphagidae, based on the name of the oldest genus (*Meliphaga* Lewin, 1898, type *M. chrysotis* Lewin). Around 1920, Mathews discovered that a genus of insects had previously been named *Melophagus* (1802). He therefore rejected the name *Meliphaga*, replaced it by the next older name, *Ptilotis* (1837) and rejected the name Meliphagidae in favor of a family name based on the second oldest generic name in the family (*Melithreptus*, 1816), and called the honey-eaters Melithreptidae (Birds of Australia, 11: 237). By this action he committed a double blunder. First, it is not admissible to alter the typical genus of a family. Thus, if the name *Meliphaga* had really been preoccupied, a new family name would have had to be created with *Ptilotis* as its root. However, the name *Meliphaga* is by no means preoccupied by *Melophagus*, according to the International Rules, and the whole disturbing change of name was entirely unnecessary. By letter, I called Mr. Mathews's attention to this matter, and he corrected his error in 1931 (*Ibis*, ser. 13, 1: 47). Australian workers fortunately have never adopted the erroneous name Melithreptidae. It has, however, crept into a number of general works on birds, including the Zoological Record for 1941 and 1942. May this note speed the restoration of the correct name Meliphagidae for the Australian Honey-eaters.—E. MAYR, *American Museum of Natural History, New York, N. Y.*

The Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) (Plate 18, upper figure).—In 1937 we spent one long and lucky day (October 8) watching and collecting from a great concentration of these jaegers as, almost at our masthead, they preyed on Common Terns off Steveston Breakwater near Vancouver, B. C. During other years we have had less remarkable chances to watch their work in the same locality during the autumn flight. The following somewhat unrelated points of behavior and morphology are perhaps worth discussing.

(1) *The bill.*—Few writers manage to mention jaegers without emphasizing the "hawk-like" character and savage or bloodthirsty temperament, usually with special reference to the form of the bill. The latter, as compared to the pure larid type, is indeed hawk-like, designed to pierce as well as tear, and impressive enough in a dry skin. But the peculiar fact is that on fresh specimens of all ages the upper mandible is so weakly flexible that it can easily be bent up to right angles, and so soft that a needle and thread slips easily through almost any part of it! It is a question whether it could wound the least protected part of a tern, while as an effective weapon against *Larus philadelphia* or any *Rissa*, not to mention *Larus brachyrhynchus*, which we have once or twice seen attacked off the Spanish Banks, outside Vancouver Harbor, it would be quite ineffective.

(2) *The use of the feet.*—No less ridiculously ineffective are the feet. This is evident in handling 'winged' birds which, even in the ecstasy of fear, can exert only the feeblest pressure, or in watching hurt or gorged birds swim. With obviously great effort they barely propel themselves through the water at visible speed. Adaptive economy—the sacrifice of everything to one astounding faculty, agility and speed in flight—has not produced structural modifications equivalent to those of terns, swallows, or swifts, but is travelling the same road.

(3) *The predatory technique.*—Hence the beautiful and bewildering character of the jaeger's attack. When two gulls quarrel or when an eagle robs an osprey