

CORRESPONDENCE

SMYTHIES'S 'BIRDS OF BURMA'

EDITOR, THE AUK.—Regarding Smythies's 'Birds of Burma,' on the status of which Mr. S. Dillon Ripley gave interesting information in the last issue of *The Auk* (63: 631, 1946), I would add the following. I received notice of this publication from the American Baptist Mission Press some time in 1941, and immediately ordered a copy. Before I thought my order had time to reach Rangoon, Burma had been overrun by the Japanese, and I expected that I would never hear anything further. Imagine my delighted surprise when, about two months after the fall of Rangoon, I received 'Birds of Burma' through the mail. The volume is now in my personal library.—B. W. CARTWRIGHT, *Chief Naturalist, Ducks Unlimited, Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

VERNACULAR NAMES OF BIRDS

EDITOR OF THE AUK.—The problem of the correct vernacular names of birds is arousing general interest at the moment (see for instance the note by Eisenmann and Poor, 1946). In addition to the general problem which they discuss, it would seem desirable to achieve as much uniformity as possible between British and American "English names," as an increasing number of people are studying birds on both sides of the Atlantic. We suggest the following principles as a basis for discussion.

A. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. English names should not be regarded as rigidly fixed. The English language is always in process of slow change, and this seems a desirable state of affairs. Further, popular usage must be the ultimate criterion, and the deliberate creation of new names which have no popular support should be reduced to a minimum. However, we suggest that periodic bird lists should be published, to help to stabilize names, in the same way that English dictionaries have been issued in the past for the language as a whole. Obviously, rules of priority have no validity with regard to English names.

2. We agree with Eisenmann and Poor that every species should have a comprehensive name used for all races of that species, and which can be applied to any individual without identifying it as to race. This will necessarily involve the deliberate creation of some new names, but these should be as few as possible.

3. We suggest that English names for subspecies should in general be abandoned, because (a) the addition of an English subspecific name in front of the specific name often makes the whole name extremely long and clumsy; (b) most subspecies cannot be identified in the field; (c) they give the amateur a misleadingly definite idea of the subspecies concept; (d) the use of the scientific (Latin) name of the subspecies is sufficient in itself and is without ambiguity. Should an English name be necessary for any purpose, the specific name could be preceded or followed by the breeding area of the race in question, but this practice should be reduced to a minimum.

However, it may be desirable to retain separate subspecific names for extremely distinct subspecies, particularly where this name came into existence before the subspecies concept, e. g. popular usage will probably make for the retention of Pied Wagtail and White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii* and *Motacilla alba alba*) in western Europe, as these very distinctive forms already had English names before they were treated as races of the same species. There are also cases in which it is doubtful whether two forms should be considered as separate species or as subspecies of the same species; e. g. Carrion and Hooded Crows (*Corvus corone* and *Corvus cornix*).

4. Brevity is desirable.

5. It is a mistake to be too logical. Names sanctioned by long and frequent usage should in general be retained, even if they are somewhat inappropriate.

6. Specific names which refer to a region or a person, or which include the term "common," are less satisfactory than descriptive names, so should be avoided where a satisfactory alternative is available.

7. A qualifying adjective to the group name is not essential. E. g. in England the use of the name "Whitethroat" for *Sylvia communis* causes no confusion, even though there is also a Lesser Whitethroat (*S. curruca*). The terms "Common Whitethroat" and "Greater Whitethroat" have quietly dropped out of use. The same applies to many other cases.

B. BRITISH AND AMERICAN NAMES

1. Where the same species (whether or not it is of the same subspecies) bears a different vernacular name in Britain and North America, uniformity should be obtained by one of the following methods.

(a) Where a species is regular on one side of the Atlantic, but only a vagrant on the other, it should take the name in use where it is regular; e. g. Baldpate not American Wigeon for *Anas americana*.

(b) Where a species is regular on both sides of the Atlantic, but the name on one side is considered by both British and American ornithologists to be very inferior to the other name, only the one name should be used; e. g. *Podiceps auritus* could well become Horned Grebe, Slavonian Grebe being suppressed, and *P. griseigena* could well become Red-necked Grebe, Holboell's Grebe being suppressed.

(c) Where a species is regular on both sides of the Atlantic, and the name on one side is a name formerly in regular use on the other, this name might be adopted on both sides, but, temporarily, it would probably be desirable to retain the other name in brackets; e. g. *Podiceps nigricollis* might become Eared (Black-necked) Grebe, and *Mergus merganser* might become Goosander (American Merganser).

(d) Where the species is regular on both sides of the Atlantic, and is usually known by a good but different name on each side, either of which it is undesirable to change, both names should be retained. In an American list the American name should be put first, in an English list the English name; e. g. in an American list "Chickadee or Willow Tit," for *Parus atricapillus*, in a British list "Great Northern Diver or Loon" for *Colymbus immer*.

N. B. We suggest that procedure (d) should be adopted in every case where a joint English and American committee feel that there is any good reason to retain both names. This is in accordance with the policy announced at the beginning of this note, that the English language cannot be forced, though it evolves. We do not think there is anything to be gained by suppressing any of the well-known names on either side of the Atlantic at the present time. However, we think it quite likely that, confronted by two vernacular names, one of which is much simpler than the other, popular usage will tend more and more to the use of the simpler one, and that the other will gradually be dropped, e. g. we think it quite possible that Arctic Skua may come to replace Parasitic Jaeger for *Stercorarius parasiticus*. However, we feel that such verdicts should in most cases be left to popular usage to decide.

2. Where a different species bears the same name on either side of the Atlantic, both species should continue to bear this name, but where there is any doubt as to which is intended, the prefix "American" or "European" should be added; e. g. *Turdus migratorius* is the American Robin, and *Erithacus rubecula* is the European

Robin. It is in our view undesirable to attempt to change most of the names which come under this head, as their usage is so long established. However, a possible exception might be made in the interests of general clarity in cases where the name on one side of the Atlantic is misleading from the point of view of general relationships within a group; e. g. would it conflict too much with American popular opinion to drop the term "buzzard" for a vulture, to restrict the term "hawk" to accipitrine birds, and to use the term "falcon" (not hawk) for members of the genus *Falco*?

To conclude, these points are intended for discussion, and we would suggest that a joint committee of British and American ornithologists be formed to decide on the points raised.—B. W. TUCKER; DAVID LACK; *University of Oxford, England.*

NOTES AND NEWS

NOTICE

THE SIXTY-FIFTH ANNUAL MEETING

AS ANNOUNCED in *The Auk* for January, 1947, with corrections in the April issue, the Sixty-fifth Stated Meeting of the American Ornithologists Union will be held in Toronto this year with general sessions at the Royal Ontario Museum on September 9, 10 and 11. Business meetings of Council, Fellows and Members will be held at the headquarters hotel, the Royal York, on September 8. A field day has been planned for September 12. More details will be announced in the Committees Circular of information which will reach all members before the meeting. Please make your hotel reservations early.

The Secretary advises that titles of papers intended for presentation at this meeting *must* be in his hands not later than August 9 in order to be included in the printed program. Titles should be accompanied by brief abstracts of the contents of the papers and statements concerning the time needed for delivery and the kind of projection facilities needed, if any.

THE AUK is saddened to announce the death of P. A. Taverner, Fellow, at Ottawa on May 9, 1947.

As we go to press, word has come of the death of Wilfred H. Osgood, Fellow, at Chicago on June 21.