

COMMENTARY

ORNITHOLOGY AND SOCIOBIOLOGY: A FORUM

The "new synthesis" of sociobiology that E. O. Wilson advanced in 1975 has generated considerable heat and controversy. Much of the more dramatic argument has centered about the applicability of these ideas to human behavior and sociality, but more conventional biological applications of the ideas have also sparked spirited discussion. Sociobiology has indeed crystalized some previously existing concepts and developed new ideas, and these offer fresh and exciting ways of looking at sociality in biological systems. At the same time, however, some rather sloppy science has been disguised by adopting the catch-words of sociobiology. Ornithological studies have perhaps contributed in both ways.

Studies of birds comprise a substantial share of the empirical foundation of concepts of social behavior and organization (despite their rather slim treatment in Wilson's book), and contemporary investigations of avian sociality are in turn being strongly influenced by the ideas and approaches of sociobiology. Accordingly, in late 1980 I invited several individuals to contribute essays discussing the relationship between ornithology and sociobiology from their own personal perspective. I asked each to consider how fruitful the interplay between these disciplines has been, what each has contributed to the growth of the other, and what directions future studies might take. Each essayist participated independently, without knowledge of who else was contributing or what they said. Their comments reflect something of the diversity of approaches and views that characterize contemporary avian sociobiology. I hope that they will stimulate further thinking about the issues they raise, and perhaps some redirection of research to resolve these issues, while inevitably raising others.—John A. Wiens

THE ORNITHOLOGICAL ROOTS OF SOCIOBIOLOGY

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Sociobiology is nothing more than the study of the evolutionary adaptiveness of social behavior. One sometimes forgets this during the intellectual highs of research discussions with colleagues, or the emotional lows of debate with social scientist friends. At such times sociobiology somehow seems to be much more than just another branch of animal behavior, more than just the latest spin-off from evolutionary biology having its day in the sun. What is the real importance of sociobiology, why has it attracted such widespread attention, and what role is ornithology playing in its development?

Fields of science, like organisms, pass through developmental stages. The first occurs with the birth of one or more major discoveries that profoundly reshape our thinking about old problems. This is followed by a stage of rapid growth, analogous

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