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100 Years Ago in The Auk



Excerpt from "Recent Literature" (1891, *Auk* 8: 379-381)

"Sharpe's 'Review of Recent Attempts to Classify Birds.'*—Dr. Sharpe prefaces his own scheme with some well-considered remarks on the slow process of building up a natural classification of birds, which he compares to the construction of a building to which each labourer in the field contributes his quota. 'Sometimes the structure has to be altered and amended but it is seldom that a labourer, whose soul is in his work, retires without having added something in the shape of useful materials. It takes a long time—it may be years of study—before a sound brick is baked. . . . It is certain, however, that by this 'brick'-making materials for the structure of the Classification of Birds will be slowly gathered.' He has also a word for the critic who pulls down but never builds up. This is followed by some practical and very sensible remarks upon the exhibition of bird material in museums, and on the general subject of the study of birds. He says: 'If the system of teaching by artistic groups be adapted, then only the principal forms would require illustration, and a representation of the leading type of each order or sub-order would suffice. A supplementary gallery might be provided, in which types of each family, subfamily, and genus of birds would be exhibited, but lower than genera I would never descend in a public exhibition. The student of species should find his material in the 'study' series, . . . and there each species should be amply illustrated by actual specimens showing the plumage of both sexes at all times of the year, young birds in all stages, moulting individuals, and a full series exhibiting geographical distribution and variation in the species, even if it requires a series of specimens. The days have gone by where the description of new species was the be-all and end-all of an ornithologist's hopes. The warfare over priority of nomenclature is fast showing signs of waning. . . . It is time, however, that by some such means as an International Congress of Ornithologists the names of the species of birds were settled once and for all, in order that we may turn our attention to the far more important facts of geographical distribution and life history of species. We are approaching a time when the study of rainfall and climate, of altitude and locality, and even the conditions of weather under which a specimen was procured, will be considered indispensable for the minute study which is to be our portion in the not very distant future.'" (Doubtless Dr. Sharpe is not unaware that these important factors have already received much attention in some quarters, having been uppermost in the minds of many American students for the last two decades at least.)"—J. A. Allen.

*A Review of Recent Attempts to Classify Birds; an Address delivered before the Second International Ornithological Congress on the 18th of May, 1891. By R. Bowdler Sharpe, LL.D., F.L.S., etc. (Zoological Department British Museum.) Budapest, 1891. (Published at the Office of the Congress.) Roy. 8vo. pp. 90, pl. xii.