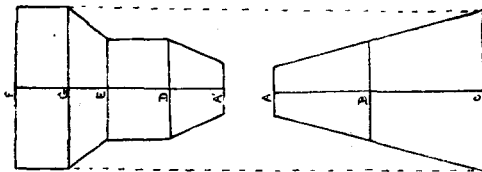


COMMUNICATIONS.

QUESTIONS OF THE DAY.*

Some months ago editorial comment was made in the CONDOR (July-August 1900, p. 95) on a 'valuable service to ornithologists whose lots are cast in the San Francisco Bay region, referring to the recognition by name of certain birds of this region which are intermediate in character between those found to the north and south respectively. From the standpoint taken, which seems to be one for convenience in labeling specimens, this 'solution of the difficulty' might commend itself to collectors in that region providing they never received specimens from their fellow collectors a little to the north or south, and to these latter it would be a more or less questionable boon under any circumstances. In case the ornithologists of the San Francisco Bay region should desire to attach names to the birds found not more than 100 miles either north, south or east of them they would find that this supposed labor-saving device had multiplied their troubles instead of simplifying them. Moreover, an additional name in a group of this kind rather tends to obscure the relationships of the forms than otherwise. To one who has seen no specimens whatever the binomial *Chamaea fasciata* and the trinomial *Chamaea f. phaea* would indicate "an unbroken gradation from one to the other," exactly what admittedly exists. Thus if two names indicate the facts it would not seem to be more convenient to have three. Under different circumstances however it is conceivable that even with no greater difference between the extremes it might be advisable to adopt several names in order to represent the facts; and this also even if the respective degrees of difference were slight and difficult to determine.



To illustrate, let the lines A, A', B, C, D, E, F, and G in the accompanying diagram represent the intensity of a variable character of any two animals at various points in their development and the lines A C and A F the extent of the animals' distribution. In one case suppose the salient character or characters to have developed uninterrupted from condition A to condition C and these extremes recognized by name; then suppose in another case a development from A to D, after which there is a constant condition from D to E with the intensity

of D, and in like manner suppose a development from E to G and thence constant to F. In this case although the intensity of F does not exceed that of C it seems that the facts can be best represented in nomenclature by three names instead of two and although the intensity of B and D are equal it would be advisable to recognize D in nomenclature, while it would serve no useful purpose, as far as present knowledge goes, to treat B in the same manner. This is theory. The real conditions are of course much more involved than any simple diagram can indicate; nevertheless the rapid increase of collections and knowledge of physiographic conditions constantly contribute to the elucidation of problems of this sort. Such questions certainly appear in the study of groups of mammals and possibly to a slighter degree in the study of birds. Certainly a name is unnecessary for a condition which represents neither of two extremes nor a special development of either, but merely a point between them on either side of which is a progressive development in opposite directions. And furthermore, degree of difference is not the sole criterion for the application of names; and the fact that a species or subspecies is difficult to identify is not alone a reason for withholding a name. A lazy 'lay' ornithologist or an ignorant one might contend that, since it requires care and experience to distinguish some species of *Empidonax*, it would be most convenient to 'lump' them. As a matter of fact there have been very few subspecies described which are as difficult of discrimination as the species *Empidonax minimus* and *E. trailli alborum*.

The tendency to revolt among the 'lay' class against the so-called 'splitting' seems to be not so much because it is thought to be based on unsound principles, but more because it brings about a multiplication of names which are hard to remember and because it makes the identification of individual specimens difficult. The popular ornithologist, following in the footsteps of other popular scientists, has reached the point where he cannot keep pace with the man who gives up his life to technical work. There was a time when country gentlemen of the Gilbert White type were able to keep fairly abreast of all branches of natural science, but now to be expert in any one branch requires almost a lifetime of study. The question then arises—is this a deplorable condition, or is it the natural outcome of a vast increase in quantity and quality of material, a corresponding increase in facilities for work, and a convenient access to useful contributive results of investigations in other branches of science? Is it strange that the careful ornithologist should continually add named and

*See Bird Lore, 11, 1, 38-39, Jan.-Feb. 1901.

labeled facts to the sum of knowledge as well as the astronomer with his new telescopes discover new stars and the histologist with his new methods of preservation find unexpected conditions?

A name is called a handle to a fact; and it might be argued that if the handle becomes too slippery to grasp it loses its usefulness. There is another side to this however, for even a slippery handle may be held firmly by a strong or practiced hand, and if the facts be worth grasping, is it not more profitable to have trained hands for slippery handles than to have no handles and lose sight of significant facts?

"The importance of determining with the utmost exactness the geographical variations of birds in further elucidating the laws of evolution by environment" certainly cannot be overestimated. Practically all that is known of this subject has been accomplished by careful systematists, splitters possibly, who with large series of specimens have conscientiously worked out problems which in many cases could not possibly be appreciated by equally acute workers having few specimens from limited localities. Would it then advance knowledge of this subject to promulgate a doctrine that characters not convincing in a single specimen should be disregarded. A few mistakes now and then may not be more harmful than otherwise, for in rectifying them a better appreciation of the facts is always gained and new lines of investigation are often started. From the beginning of systematic zoological work mistakes have been made, but if this were to deter workers from entering the field, progress would be exceedingly slow. The mistakes which were made in the days of 'lumping' were certainly more egregious than any the 'splitters' have made, and it can hardly be gainsaid that of the two extremes, splitting is the one which tends to the most careful work and the keenest appreciation of nature's facts. If the great army of amateur ornithologists cannot keep pace with the technical systematists there is still nothing in the nature of the case which will interfere with the very important studies which they are making of the life histories of our birds. In publishing the results of his work the ornithologist who does not have access to large collections may choose to subordinate subspecific names by printing them in small type or referring to them collectively under each species and still the value of his contributions to distribution or life history is not necessarily impaired. If it is impossible to draw a mean between 'splitters' and 'lumpers', there ought to be room for each to work in his own sphere.

The foregoing remarks are made in no controversial spirit whatever, but entirely in the hope that they may elicit further discussion of questions which must be of considerable concern to all who are interested or working in systematic zoology.

WILFRED H. OSGOOD.

Washington, D. C. Feb. 18, 1901.

ANENT POSSESSIVE BIRD NAMES.

*"Be not the first by whom the new is tried,
Nor yet the last to cast the old aside."*

EDITORS OF THE CONDOR:—You will perhaps permit me once more, through the medium of your paper, to open the question of the use of common bird names. The question which I raise this time is not of common names *vs.* scientific names, but has to do with the changes which have been rung on some of our trivial names.

The most radical change is that adopted by the Biological Survey and first used by them in North American Fauna No. 16. This is the dropping of the "s" in such names as Townsend's Warbler making Townsend Warbler. This at first sight looks peculiar and in such names as Gray Tanager and Brown Song Sparrow one might be led to suspect these birds of being respectively gray and brown, but this is not a serious objection.

The points in favor of the change are stated in a letter from Dr. Merriam, dated December 22, of which the following is a part:

"I would state that my practice of dropping the "s" in the common names of species derived from the names of persons is based on two things: (1) The fact that the species are not in any way the property of the persons whose names they bear, but are merely named in honor of these persons; (2) The modern tendency in similar cases in other departments of science. You are aware of course that the National Board on Geographical Names has for many years abandoned the use of possessives in all geographical names, as Lassen Butte, not Lassen's Butte, Hudson Bay, not Hudson's Bay, and so on. Similarly the Forestry people in their catalogue and checklist of forest trees of the United States have dropped the possessive, using Parry pinion, not Parry's pinion, Jeffrey pine, not Jeffrey's pine, Coulter pine, not Coulter's pine, Englemann spruce, not Englemann's spruce, and so on to the end of the list. Among botanists the same tendency is notable, and it occurred to me that there was no particular reason why we should stand at the tail of the procession."

It might be added in favor of the simpler form of name that there is a slight saving of time and space. Hudson Bay is shorter and simpler than Hudson's Bay and just as specific. The same is true of all personal names either botanical or zoological. I trust, Mr. Editors that you will find it desirable to adopt this idea for THE CONDOR.

Personally I take little interest in the matter, common names being altogether unreliable, but as there is considerable difference of opinion among our members, it seems well to bring the subject before the Club as a whole. There is also some variation in names of