

CORRESPONDENCE

TO THE EDITOR OF THE CONDOR:

In a review of my paper on Alaskan birds, published in your issue for November-December, 1902, it appears that in my published writings I have not made clear my position in regard to the desirability of recognizing geographical races of birds in nomenclature and I beg of you space in which to reply to your reviewer's claim that my "scientific" work is not in harmony with my views expressed in another connection.

My protest against the description of geographical races is not indiscriminate. It is directed toward the large amount of unsound work of this kind which has done so much to bring systematic ornithology into disrepute among those who cannot distinguish between the good and the bad.¹ It is not only from this, and, from what may be termed the popular point of view, that these attempts to burden our nomenclature with baseless names are to be deprecated. There are sound scientific reasons against these efforts to name definitely the indefinite. They are admirably expressed by Mr. Joseph Grinnell in your issue for July-August, 1902, page 96; Mr. Grinnell in questioning Mr. Oberholser's reference of a horned lark from Stockton, Cal., to *leucolæma*, writes: "Now may not this individual, showing an aggregate of characters nearest *leucolæma*, be not simply an individual extreme of, say, *merrilli*; which occurs in numbers in the same locality at the same season? . . . Is there not danger of denoting such extreme individuals by the names of similarly looking subspecies when their real affinities are not with those races at all? It is very evident that mistakes of this kind will lead to wrong deductions in regard to migratory movements, and distribution in general, which is after all where the chief value of distinguishing geographical races comes in."

This is well put and the same argument could be used in many cases to show that in such important phases of bird study as migration and winter distribution excessive subdivision is positively prejudicial to accurate work.

The question who shall decide what birds are "worth the naming" has only one answer; the American Ornithologists' Union's Committee on Classification and Nomenclature is the court in which a bird's claims to recognition by name are to be established. Composed of seven expert ornithologists, representing varying points of view, no better judicial body can be obtained. Let us see, then, what has been this Committee's attitude toward the systematic work of the past sixteen years.

At the twentieth Congress of the American Ornithologists' Union, held in Washington, D. C., in November last, Dr. J. A. Allen presented a paper on this subject entitled 'The A. O. U. Check List—Its History and Its Future,'² in which it was shown that only 52 per cent of the proposed modifications in the "Check List" have been endorsed by the A. O. U. Committee on Classifications and Nomenclature. Dr. Allen adds: "If there had been no Committee to which these 500 or more questions could have been referred for a formal verdict it is perhaps easier to imagine than to describe what would have been the condition of the nomenclature of North American birds in 1902."

Thus it appears that the protest against much of the systematic work of today comes not only from "specimen labelers and popular writers," as my reviewer tells us, but from the representative, scientific ornithologists composing the A. O. U.'s Committee on Classification and Nomenclature—a very practical kind of protest which, as Dr. Allen well states (l. c.), has saved us from "chaos."

Yours respectfully,

FRANK M. CHAPMAN.

American Museum of Natural History, New York City, Dec. 19, 1902.

EDITOR OF THE CONDOR:

I note that a correspondent in the November-December CONDOR, "raises a voice of protest" against what appears to him to be a "cruel indifference" to or a lack of sympathy with bird life. The present writer, without raising his voice to any unpleasant inflection, would like to whisper a few mild suggestions to the Pasadenan.

My friend, convictions are fine things to have, and we are honored in their possession. But it is usually best to keep them, for the disseminators of convictions may do a lot of good—or otherwise. I fear in the present instance, however praiseworthy your intentions, it was—otherwise.

Larger men than you and I, my friend, have smote the air on this question and left no impression on the breezes which blow where the birds still sing over their graves. There is good and bad in it, and it will take more than plenty of ink and a pen to settle the question to the sat-

¹ Cf. *Science*, 1901, p. 316; 1902, p. 229.

² See *The Auk*, Jan. 1903, pp. 1-9.