

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.

isfaction of all concerned. I could argue it, and ask which does the most harm, a spyglass ornithologist with a ready imagination, who describes things we never heard of before (and which never really happened), or a sane student of birds who is obliged to use a gun, and whose writings may be depended upon for information and not for imagination? I might do this, but I prefer not to walk in where angels fear to tread.

There are several things well said, and sentiments given noble expressions in your communication, and with these I have no quarrel; but it is the evil men do that lives after them. It is the evil of the writer who talks of "dead and stuffed bird skins," who strains a point to serve his argument, even though the ill-judged reflection be at good men and better ornithologists than he. Here is where the damage of careless spilling of ink on these questions comes in.

You are not fortunate in paraphrasing what you say is a "very bad popular saying," concerning Indians, as, that collectors seem to believe "the only good bird is a dead bird." It may be to your mind a very bad saying that "A good Indian is a dead Indian," but very often it has been true. The late Major Bendire hunted Indians and birds in the same country and killed both with equal lack of compunction, when the blood of murdered settlers cried aloud for vengeance, or the authorities at the National Museum wanted positive identification. A dead Indian was a very good Indian to Major Bendire, and a dead bird in the hand looked better to him where the identity of a rare set of eggs was in question than a squint at a bird through a glass. He used the spyglass on the Indians.

You refer to an "interesting and excellently written article" in the September-October CONDOR on the rufous-crowned sparrow, "the description of a social colony on a little hillside opposite a schoolhouse," and add "where the birds obtained a part of their living no doubt from the scraps remaining of the children's lunches." Then you go on to speak of these "feathered friends" which the teacher, "if she was up-to-date," you think, taught the children to love and protect.

You don't know anything about it, but to add a nice little pathetic touch you "think" all this! Then you go on to score the ornithologist who "collected" the parent after finding the nest, as you say, "merely for dissection to show that her nest of eggs was complete." This statement is not merely absurd, for it is at variance with the facts; it does injury.

The schoolhouse referred to (and I know the country) is properly speaking, in the mountains, and if the nice little school boys spoken of were able to get anywhere near these wary sparrows they probably used a slingshot on them. Without the bird for positive identification the valuable and interesting article, which the southern critic praises so highly, would never have been possible. The bird was shot and properly shot, for identification, as the set of eggs was extremely rare, and was not sacrificed merely to satisfy a puerile curiosity as to a full nest complement, as the well-meaning critic asserts. Without positive identity what could have been written as to the singular differences in color of eggs of this same species? As to the number of skins secured from this favored patch of hillside, the species is rare, and doubtless they are needed in collections. Certainly they will not be missed up there in the hills where we may infer the "Dago" school boy, if he takes notice at all, shies stones at them on his happy schoolward way. There will be rufous-crowned sparrows on many a hillside when you and I are where the daisies grow!

H. R. TAYLOR.

Alameda, Cal.

GENERAL NEWS NOTES

The American Ornithologists' Union held its twentieth Annual Congress at Washington, D. C., November 17-20, 1902. All the officers for 1902 were re-elected. Harry C. Oberholser was chosen Fellow and the following Members were added: Andrew Allison, Paul Bartsch, A. C. Bent, W. C. Braislin, Hubert L. Clark, A. H. Howell, E. A. Goldman, F. H. Knowlton, A. H. Norton, T. G. Pearson, S. F. Rathbun, P. M. Silloway, and C. O. Whitman. The program was one of unusual interest and the attendance exceeded that of any previous meeting. The Union will meet in Philadelphia, November 16, 1903. (See Editorial column).

During the Christmas vacation W. W. Price, as has been his wont in past years, took a party of young men on a hunting and collecting expedition. Last year they descended the Colorado from The Needles in boats, and the two seasons previous were spent on the Colorado south of Yuma, and about the head of the gulf. This year the party penetrated the mountains of northern Sonora in quest of big game. Mr. Price is well known as a prince of good fellows in camp, and it is probable the party had a thoroughly enjoyable time, besides acquiring valuable material. Later we hope to publish an account of the trip.