

THE NEW CHECK-LIST

BY P. A. TAVERNER

WE ARE all more or less interested in the forthcoming check-list, now under preparation; and most of us have ideas as to what we should like to see therein. That everybody should be satisfied with the results, whatever they may be, is beyond hope. No matter what action is taken there are sure to be some disappointed ones.

Some of the reforms that I, personally, should like to see come to pass, seem beyond the grounds of possibility. Such is, for instance, the suppression of the Law of Priority as interpreted in Canons XII-XIV of the Code. The only apparent way to make our nomenclature stable is for the Committee to take high-handed measures and say that so-and-so shall be the names of the species, for all time to come, as long as the present system flourishes, grammar, philology, or priority to the contrary notwithstanding.

This would, I am aware, raise a storm of protest. But the international confusions arising therefrom certainly would be no greater than they now are, and perhaps would be less, as confictions once learned would stay learned and be subject to but half the change that they are now. The case of *Stercorarius parasiticus* is a fine example of international discord, where the same name applies to two different species according to two current systems of nomenclature. It matters very little what a species is called, so long as the name is permanent and all know the form to which it applies. All our literature refers to *Corvus americanus*. What good it has done to change it to *brachyrhynchos* I fail to see. It has antiquated whole shelves of our literature and, in this special case, has given us a difficult for a simple and thoroly characteristic name. The solution, however, of this question may be, as yet, far in the future, and perhaps belongs to the millennium rather than to the present.

There are, however, other desirable things that seem more probable of realization. Some of them are mentioned in the last issue of THE CONDOR over the initials "J. G." on page 154.

The suggestion of applying qualifying terms to each and all of the varieties of a subspecifically divided species is most wholesome, and should be applied to the scientific as well as the vernacular nomenclatural system. Modern subspecific ideas should not recognize the superiority of one variety over another without good evolutionary reasons for so doing. Why call one form a species and the rest varieties just because one of them had, of necessity, to be discovered first? To do so, not only fails to represent the true facts of the case, but in many instances actually falsifies them. The trinomial system necessitates the consideration of the term "species" as a collective noun, of which the varieties or subspecies are the component parts.

The western robin is just as much the "American robin" as the eastern form and, as such, has just as much right to that name. We should, then, be able to speak of both forms as a whole, as the American robin, *Merula migratoria*. When we are certain of the subspecific identification (not always easy or possible) or wish to differentiate the two forms, we can then say eastern robin, *M. m. migratoria*, or western robin, *M. m. propinqua*, as the case may be. Without doubt, this fact of the equality of all the varieties of a species, should be shown graphically in the arrangement of the coming list. Heretofore every slight variation that has been

deemed worthy of separation, has been given exactly the same honors in the way of type, position, etc., as the most strongly marked species. This lack of graphical co-ordination, in the old lists, has, I am sure, thru subconscious action, had much to do with "exaltation of subspecies" by raising small differences to a prominence in our thoughts far beyond the position to which they are taxonomically entitled.

The fact that a bird is a horned lark, is of far more importance than that it resembles Hoyt's form of the species; yet the latter minor fact is often dwelt upon with greater vehemence than the former major one. I should suggest that the subspecies be printed in smaller type than the specific headings and be set back from the margin, in a manner that will indicate visually their real taxonomic value as varieties. Something like this would, I think, be acceptable:

761. *Merula migratoria* (Linn.) AMERICAN ROBIN.

Synonymy, range, etc.

a. *M. m. migratoria* (Linn.) EASTERN ROBIN.

Range, etc.

b. *M. m. propinqua* (Ridgw.) WESTERN ROBIN.

Range, etc.

The custom of giving a simple name to one species, and the same name with a qualifying prefix to the next has, in several cases, been responsible for much confusion. Had the term "water thrush" been a generic cognomen and applied to all the members of the genus, and had *M. noveboracensis* been differentiated as "northern water thrush," the distribution of the species, in this locality, would not be in the badly mixed state that it is now.

Another feature that we want to see revised in the new List is the geographical ranges. We have acquired a deal of new data on this point since the last List, and nothing is more needed, at present writing, than up-to-date geographical distributions.

In regard to the extensive changes proposed in the vernacular names in the editorial above referred to, it does not seem to be expedient to make any more changes than is necessary. Of course it is just as important that the vernacular nomenclatural tools should be good tools as the scientific ones, but fixity in both is equally desirable. Adding qualifiers to existing names can cause little confusion; but radical changes are apt to do so. Not being familiar with the western species, I can hardly pass judgment upon many of the proposals made; but except in such cases where the name is flagrantly misleading, such as calling a quail a partridge, or vice versa, I should think caution should be practiced. We want fixity in the vernacular as well as the scientific systems and minor inconsistencies should be borne with to this end.

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