

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

The expression "tempest in a teapot" is frequently used to describe an overreaction to an event of relatively minor importance. By this standard, the published and unpublished reactions among certain birders to the *32nd Supplement to the A.O.U. Check-list* (*Auk*, 90:411-419, 1973) might best be called a "hurricane in a thimble." Misconceptions or errors of fact about the *Supplement*, the *Check-list*, the A.O.U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, and, indeed, about the A.O.U. itself, have been perpetuated, all too often by people who should know better. I have a unique opportunity to serve in an interpretive capacity for bird students puzzled or misled by all of the brouhaha, in that I am both a member of the A.O.U. Committee that prepared the *Supplement*, and President of an ornithological society whose membership includes a large proportion of nonprofessional ornithologists.

Those of us who were around during the years 1944 through 1956, when a series of annual supplements in *The Auk* gradually transformed the taxonomy and nomenclature of the fourth (1931) edition of the *A.O.U. Check-list* into that of the fifth (1957) edition, can remember no such hubbub about the published changes, although there were far more of these (even, sometimes, in a single supplement) than were listed in 1973. This relative calm can no doubt be explained by the fact that in those years birding was still a recreation and not an organized cult.

The publicity given to the reactions of the more articulate (if not accurate) critics of the *32nd Supplement* culminated (or at least I hope it culminated) in the asinine and error-filled article, "The Busted Birds," in the 18 February 1974 issue of *Time* magazine. In this, an "infuriated enthusiast" identified only as a self-appointed spokesperson for the American Birding Association, described the dichotomy between that group and the A.O.U. Committee as one between "gung-ho list chasers" and "sedentary bathrobe birders." As most members of the Wilson Society know from field trips at meetings, many of the senior professional ornithologists are at least "gung-ho" birders, although seldom "list-chasers." But to describe the work of the A.O.U. Committee as that of "sedentary bathrobe birders" is only to use extreme language to verbalize a misconception that I have found also to exist among more level-headed but equally uninformed critics of the Committee.

There is an unfortunate impression extant that the Committee simply sits about in smoke-filled rooms and arbitrarily rules on the taxonomic or nomenclatorial status of North American species and subspecies of birds, almost (to listen to some of the critics) on an ad hoc basis, and *certainly* without any "field experience" with the birds involved. In point of fact, one of the ground rules of this Committee has always been that no decision to alter the taxonomic status of a bird or group of birds will be made by the Committee itself in the absence of *published information* supporting such a change. For this first of the post-1957 supplements, the Committee decided that it was not enough for a majority of the Committee *itself* to be persuaded of the correctness. State, Miss. 39762, will be the new editor of *The Wilson Bulletin*. His tenure starts that the changes would "conform to the treatment currently believed correct by the great majority of active systematists" [emphasis added]. And what kind of people are these active systematists? Museum fossils? Far from it. Examine the names of the authors whose papers are cited in support of taxonomic changes. Not all would call themselves systematists; not all, to be honest, are field men. But consider such names as Cooch, Dickerman, Dilger, Holmes, Jehl, McKinney, Meyerriecks, Phillips, Pitelka, Raitt, Short, N. G. Smith, Stein, and Sutton, among many others cited. These are men who *know* their birds, who have spent countless hours in blinds, or trudging through habitats ranging from bleak arctic islands to dense tropical forests, in pursuit of ornithological knowledge. When such men tell us, for example, that their studies

indicate that birds formerly thought to be different species will freely interbreed, or, conversely, that birds that appear to us to be virtually identical actually segregate out into two "kinds" that ignore each other as potential mates, I think the bird student who really wants to know more of the living world of ornithology will listen.

There is not space here to go into the emotionally-charged matter of the "official" English-language names applied to birds (which, contrary to general usage, are seldom either "common" or "vernacular" names). Nobody, least of all the members of the A.O.U. Committee (all of whom are or have been active birders) will deny the "gung-ho lister" the privilege of calling off as many ticks on his list as he likes, under whatever names he may choose. But this has nothing to do with the serious study of birds as living organisms, products of millions of years of evolution, and *that* is what most of us in both the American Ornithologists' Union and the Wilson Ornithological Society are concerned with.—KENNETH C. PARKES.

ORNITHOLOGICAL NEWS

AARON MOORE BAGG STUDENT MEMBERSHIP AWARDS

The preliminary announcement of the Aaron Moore Bagg Student Membership Awards (*Wilson Bulletin*, 85:490, 1973) stated that further details about these new awards would appear in the March 1974 issue of the *Bulletin*. No such additional information appeared in that issue, an oversight for which the President apologizes both to Mrs. Bagg, whose generosity has provided these awards in memory of her late husband, and to interested applicants. Final plans for the administration of the student membership awards will be made at the annual meeting in June 1974, and will be published later. Meanwhile, students may obtain information by writing to the Chairman of the Student Membership Committee, Dr. Douglas A. James, Division of Biomedical and Environmental Research, U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, Washington, D.C. 20545.

GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON COLORPLATE FUND

Through an unfortunate misunderstanding, wording of the Council's announcement (*Wilson Bull.*, 85:456, 1973) of the George Miksch Sutton Colorplate Fund did not accurately represent Dr. Sutton's wishes in connection with contributions to this Fund. It is his desire that additions to the Fund that he created for the Wilson Ornithological Society, and that will bear his name, be obtained only through his own efforts. The Council is happy to honor his wishes. Former students and other friends of Dr. Sutton who may wish to contribute to the Society in some particular way to honor Dr. Sutton may do so, with his blessing, either by sending an unrestricted gift or by contributing to another of our special-purpose funds. The Council suggests the Louis Agassiz Fuertes Research Grant Fund, which was originally Dr. Sutton's concept, and which his gifts set into motion.

NEW EDITOR FOR THE WILSON BULLETIN

Dr. Jerome A. Jackson, Department of Zoology, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, Miss. 39762, will be the new editor of *The Wilson Bulletin*. His tenure starts with the 1975 volume, preparations for which begin immediately. All new manuscripts submitted after 31 May 1974 should be sent to Dr. Jackson, as should any manuscript under revision sent in after 31 July 1974. If in doubt, authors are asked to send queries to Dr. Jackson—before sending in their manuscripts.