

Correspondence

TRINOMIALS AND MATHEWSIAN NAMES

To the Editor,

Sir,—The cover of *The Emu* carries the statement that it is published to popularize the study and protection of native birds and to record results of scientific research in ornithology. I write to draw attention to two recent innovations which are likely to have an adverse effect upon the popular study of Australian ornithology. These are, first, the use of trinomials in instances where such use is not necessitated by scientific needs, and secondly, the use of nomenclature other than that of our own "Checklist."

I refer to the paper "Birds of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, N.S.W.," in the January number, in which the nomenclature of Gregory Mathews' 1931 "List," and trinomials are used, and in which occurs, as an example: *Catoptropelicanus conspicillatus conspicillatus* for the Pelican.

The value and use of trinomials in papers dealing with taxonomy, ecology, geographical variation, evolution, and cognate subjects is conceded, but I maintain that their use in papers of the type of that referred to above is not only quite unnecessary but is likely to have an adverse effect upon the interest that many members (and others) take in the splendid hobby of field-ornithology. There is a time and place for everything, and I submit that the introduction of trinomials into our literature should be limited to what may be termed "necessitous" cases.

Admittedly the R.A.O.U. "Checklist" is out of date, but we have a committee now working towards a new edition. After all, Mr. Mathews' nomenclature is only his personal opinion—a sound opinion, certainly—but still a personal opinion, and it has never received the entire approval of our "Checklist" Committee, who have recommended retention of the use of nomenclature of the "Checklist" until a new edition has been issued. And so have you, Mr. Editor. There are pitfalls in doing otherwise, and in doing so we are burdening our literature with names some of which will eventually be discarded whereby our literature will become confused and difficult of reference. That will be especially so if use is made now of the many generic names used by Mathews, who split our recognized genera very intensively. I am convinced that the next edition of the R.A.O.U. "Checklist" will include the use of large genera, so why make use now of genera which will be jettisoned later? One example is *Catoptropelicanus* mentioned above. Peters, in his *Check-List of the Birds of the World*, does not recognize that generic name, but places our Pelican in the genus *Pelecanus*, as does our own "Checklist."

Our Committee is again functioning, and will doubtless, in due course, promulgate the results of their deliberations. Meanwhile, let us play safe.

Yours, etc.,

H. M. WHITTELL.

Bridgetown, W.A.,
22nd January, 1940.

To the Editor,

Sir,—In Mr. Hindwood's interesting account of "Murrumbidgee Birds" (vol. xxxix, p. 219) I notice that he employs the nomenclature of Mr. G. M. Mathews' 1931 "List," and has almost completely ignored the 1926 R.A.O.U. Checklist. To my mind that is to be regretted. It is admitted that Mathews' *List* will receive consideration as a basis for any future R.A.O.U. Checklist, but I think I can say without fear of contradiction that his ideas on what constitutes a genus are shared by few zoologists.

Mr. Hindwood might be commended on his adoption of trinomials, but as he has apparently accepted Mr. Mathews' names unquestioningly, their employment becomes a nuisance instead of an advantage. Everyone has a right to his own opinion, but I would like to know why Mr. Hindwood has suddenly abandoned the opinions and deductions of our own "Checklist" Committee? Errors there are in the "Checklist," but can Mr. Hindwood vouch entirely for Mathews' "List"? On what authority, for example, does he accept the alternatives of *Catoptropelicanus*, *Porzanoidea* and *Ethelornis* for the well-established *Pelecanus*, *Porzana* and *Gerygone* respectively?

The use of many of the subspecific names, such as *rosinae* (*Leipoa*) and *menziesi* (*Biziura*), is ill-advised, as in many cases, until a series of specimens has been obtained and critically examined by competent workers, they must remain mere names only.

I feel that the complete abandonment of the "Checklist" at this stage would result in a return to the chaos of the early days of Australian ornithology when Gould was often the only authority available.

Yours, etc.,

H. T. CONDON.

South Australian Museum,
24th January, 1940.

To the Editor.

Sir,—One must deplore the revolutionary departure from ordinary *Emu* practice in Mr. Hindwood's paper on Murrumbidgee birds, in utilizing trinomial nomenclature for a list based on sight observations only, names, moreover, which are taken without qualification from Mathews' 1931 "List." At the present stage of development of Australian

ornithology subspecific names are decidedly out of place in a field paper of this nature, and despite the strictures often directed at it, the R.A.O.U. "*Checklist*," 2nd edition, amply serves the current needs of our field workers, comparatively little amendment being required to bring it up to date as a *species* list. Admittedly Mathews' lists are the only ones enumerating subspecies, but as he himself would allow, they are still in a state of rapid evolution, and recent revisions by other workers show that his views on generic names and subspecific limits are still far from being generally acceptable. In the circumstances it was a pity to adopt, in a valuable reference paper, names not yet stabilized, thereby complicating nomenclature now and in the future for many bird-lovers, and so hindering popularization of ornithology among those of our members who look coldly on frequent name-changing.

Subspecific names should, at present, only be used in specialized studies and where actual specimens are critically examined. In a field list, like the one under notice, nothing of value is added to it by including subspecies names when they are merely copied out of a reference list, no matter how authoritative such may be. In fact the paper, by purporting to give a precise location to an identified subspecies, may mislead a later investigator working on racial differentiation in the various species. There is an urgent need for studies helping to give more accurately the geographical distribution of properly characterized races, but that work cannot precede the great deal of taxonomic revision which yet remains to be done.

Yours, etc.,

D. L. SERVENTY.

Albany, W.A.

25/1/40.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The attitude of the Editor has been generally to require the use of names according to the "*Checklist*." In the case of accredited workers, however—and none will deny the placing of Mr. Hindwood in that category—the use of particular individual names considered more correct than those in that publication, has been permitted. One instance will suffice, viz., Dr. Serventy's use of *sulcirostris* (= *ater* auct.) for the Little Black Cormorant. See *Emu*, vol. xxxviii, p. 357, where the reason for the change—a desirable item in such cases—is given. The Editor was scarcely prepared for so sweeping an abandonment of the "*Checklist*" as a basis and substitution of Mathews' "*List*," and regretted such use as the action did not appear to be based on special considerations and investigations as in Serventy's case referred to. Publication date, however, was very close, and it was decided to publish, the Editor later communicating with the author on the subject and indicating the likelihood of objections. No editorial comment is expressed on the matter of trinomials, for it is considered certain that Mr. Hindwood's use of them was entirely ancillary to the use of Mr. Mathews' names. The three foregoing letters having been published, it is proposed to give Mr. Hindwood the opportunity of replying, if he so desires, and provided that the reply is limited to justification and to the matters raised, after which the correspondence must be considered closed.]