

THE EMU

Vol. 73

NOVEMBER 1973

SUPPLEMENT

INVITED PAPERS

ON

ORNITHOLOGY IN AUSTRALASIA: PRACTICE, PROSPECTS AND PROGRESS

INTRODUCTION

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Australian ornithology is in a period of change, but confusion continues as to where we are going. This lack of direction has been one of the reasons why decisions have been so difficult in the past. Another has been lack of a suitable forum for discussion, argument and interchange of views. There has been no opportunity to air problems and therefore they have not always been recognized nor understood. When decisions are difficult, the more discussion the better, because in this way only can faulty ideas be eliminated and good ones promulgated.

The production of this supplement to EMU, initiated by the Editor and endorsed by Council, indicates our awareness of the need for a broader outlook. We hope that it will lead to a greater appreciation of problems connected with organization and administration at different levels. Both amateurs and professionals have much to offer and both would be the poorer if they did not co-operate. Wider understanding by all concerned with ornithology was the second and probably more difficult part of the reforms proposed by the RAOU Review Committee.

This appraisal of the present state of ornithology is written by authors all of whom are, or have been, professionally employed in ornithology, even though not all are trained professionals. These papers simply air the viewpoints of the authors and do not necessarily present the correct solutions. Our aim is to discuss the principles and objects on which we may build for the future and to draw attention to the cultural value of ornithology.

A disposition towards examining the position critically is shown by Dr D. L. Serventy as he explores the evolutionary role of societies, concluding that by a process of natural selection a hierarchy has developed overseas and is basically established here. He does not suggest that we slavishly follow overseas practice but rather that we should select what is best and then adapt it to local conditions. Once there is a definition of objects and spheres of influence, the fear of overlapping and offending will be removed from those administering local societies.

The different situation in New Zealand is interestingly discussed by Dr C. A. Fleming. These first two papers, I believe, show that our greatest handicap lies in lack of funds for the Field Investigation Committee to perform most effectively, and I think this could develop somewhat like the British Trust for Ornithology, which is run by professionals for the benefit of amateurs.

Dr M. G. Ridpath details some of the co-operative schemes undertaken overseas. These schemes call on large numbers of observers scattered over a wide area, voluntarily gathering data in a standardized way, and would be physically impossible for a small professional group, however well organized. In the greater part of Australia, we are lacking even in the simple knowledge of bird populations and distribution. Hence the planning now being carried out by the Union for the collection of standardized lists leading eventually towards an atlas project.

A natural corollary to Dr Ridpath's paper is that

of Dr S. J. J. F. Davies who applies the principle of co-ordinated research to Australian conditions. He suggests that it is vitally important to appoint a leader who first of all poses a question and then is enthusiastic about finding the answer. The next necessity is to make the project so interesting that participants will find enjoyment in helping in different ways.

Dr Davies recognizes three types of project—short, long and perpetual. He discusses some co-ordinated projects, either completed or under way, and points to the tremendous scope for activity once we can get the Field Investigation Committee on a sound footing.

From co-operative projects, we turn to field study centres. Mr R. M. Lockley, who in 1933 established on Skokholm the first of the British observatories, gives us an idea of the stimulation and delight of simply being there. He paints a vivid picture of a day's activities on the island, whether or not it is during the period of greatest migration, though little time appears to be allotted for sleeping. On-the-job training, for which observatories provide ideal opportunities, is the only satisfactory way to explain many activities that are quite simple in practice but mean little when described. For example, the excitement of learning how to handle a wild living bird impresses the beginner vastly more in a short time than theory and observation with binoculars over a much longer period.

Study has not been confined simply to birds on Skokholm, which appears to have been thoroughly investigated in almost every branch of natural history. Whereas nowadays the bird observatory concentrates on research, the emphasis at the field study centre is on teaching. Increasingly throughout Australia there is talk of field study centres, as well as the Union's own desire for a headquarters and field station. Now is the time to decide exactly what we want and Mr Lockley's paper should help us get our ideas in perspective. It may even inspire a fairy godfather—or mother—to donate a suitable place.

Notes and records are without doubt the most important aspect of a field station and in any field work, for without these, though the enjoyment remains, nothing of permanent value will accrue. Mr D. Purchase explains the absolute necessity for accuracy in recording, because slipshod notes give rise to valueless records. He discusses in detail some delicate aspects, not to be taken as personal criticism, that are merely the lack of initial training and forethought. In bird-listing, for instance, the reduction to one common denominator, a tick, he defines as ornithological stamp-collecting, no doubt giving satisfaction to the collector but otherwise of little value. For conservation, accurate information is essential and most of us are prepared to help, if shown the way, no matter in how minor a fashion.

I should like to add here my own objection to the term 'female' to record any bird not obviously male. This may well be a young male because in many species the immatures of both sexes resemble the female.

Both Messrs Lockley and Purchase mention the necessity for a Rarities Committee. This is not simply to decide whether or not a new bird has appeared, but to evaluate the worth of reports of otherwise common birds well beyond their usual range. Such a Rarities Committee is being convened by the Union and by the time these papers go to press much preliminary work will have been done. All editors will have access to the Rarities Committee and thus it ought to be possible to eliminate the majority of errors. Unfortunately, errors have a habit of perpetuating themselves, because subsequent disclaimers are often overlooked by researchers.

The necessity for publication is constantly mentioned by the authors of these papers. The paper by Dr D. D. Dow on publication leads us logically to the why, how, when and where. He points to some of the gaps in our present array of publications. By deliberate planning, these gaps may be filled, which brings us to the realization that a meeting of editors would improve the general standard and perhaps resolve obvious needs. Because distance makes such a meeting improbable, at least close liaison by correspondence would do much to ensure that all material worth publishing finds the most suitable outlet.

Dr Dow's description of the unenviable task of the editor should cause us to be more tolerant in our reaction to editorial comment. Utmost care is necessary in the selection of words to eliminate ambiguity, verbosity and jargon. In fact, so lucid are Dr Dow's instructions, that I have re-written this introduction repeatedly, conscious all the time of how easy it is to fall into error. If I have avoided disaster, it is simply because of the editor's vigilance.

In the next paper, Dr J. A. Keast dispels the image of antiquity associated with museums and directs attention to their potential value to research, education and conservation and the basic part they play in the culture of the nation. The greater part of the bird collections in our museums are of little value through wholly inadequate labelling and lack of comprehensive coverage. Had the collections been adequate, we should not be in the invidious position today of relying on an antiquated Checklist. The present compiler of the new RAOU Checklist has faced an overwhelming task in bringing taxonomy with synonymy up to date. Part 1 (Non-passerines) of the Third Official Checklist is now in press and it is hoped that Part 2 (Passerines) will follow soon after.

Australian ornithology has suffered greatly through

lack of a modern Checklist, particularly in the matter of vernacular names. I believe we should have frank and open discussion by those who appreciate the principles governing vernacular nomenclature. Both Dr D. L. Serventy (*Emu* 49: 257-267) and Dr A. H. Lenden (*Emu* 68: 227-232) have discussed their ideas and those prepared to enter into discussion will no doubt be aware of much that has been published overseas. There is hopeless confusion throughout the continent because vernaculars vary from one region to another and from one field guide, book or journal to another. The only safe way to overcome this difficulty is to be aware of the scientific name.

After production of the new Checklist, the next step will be to present a list of status and distribution. Ideally, this should have been included in the Checklist but it would have caused even further delay and was therefore relegated to the future.

In the last paper, Mr A. R. McEvey discusses the metaphysics of ornithology and man's response to birds, subjects probably seldom pondered by most readers. He introduces interesting ideas, some of which differ from the theme developed by other authors who have generally suggested developments along the lines the Union has been trying to follow.

It seems a good idea that more than one point of view should be presented.

Mr McEvey draws attention to the dilemma of science versus aesthetics and aptly defines the problem with a word he has coined, 'ornisthetics'. As a step towards bridging this gap, summaries or conclusions to papers should be written primarily for the non-scientist. Here, I would also suggest that foreign phrases that succinctly reinforce an author's statement be translated in a footnote. Even those with the benefit of a broad education cannot always readily recall the meaning of such phrases.

We hope that after reading the papers and meditating on the implications, people will be prepared to comment constructively. Because of limitations of space, some subjects are either omitted or barely touched upon. Someone may wish to rectify these omissions. Hopefully, we shall be able to publish both comment and further papers in occasional supplements, but this of course will depend on the response we receive.

We trust that this present attempt will be of value to ornithology, perhaps even beyond Australasia. We have aimed to show that we are concerned to see a happy union of professional and amateur talent and to co-operate, not compete, with other bird societies.