

Palearctic Ornithologists and Australian Birds

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Some Palearctic Ornithologists appear to think that Australia is a small island, and being ignorant of its geography sometimes publish misleading conclusions regarding the avifauna of Australia. It is possible that in the future, through the exposure of such ignorance, good work done by palæarctic workers will be depreciated. Such has already been done in the case of Ogilvie-Grant by Tom Carter. Stresemann's geography of his Australian Crows provides another instance, and I have remarked upon a third.

Meinertzhagen, a student of the school of Messrs. Hartert, Naumann and Stresemann, super-splitters in connection with palæarctic forms, has recently published in *The Ibis* a "Review of the genus *Oriolus*." He has included "the sombre-coloured group *Mimeta*," noting: "I cannot see any grounds for keeping them separate, except that they lack the brilliant coloration of the adults of true *Oriolus*." There is apparently, then, no necessity to study the variation, but much can be written about mutation and environment without much reason. Meinertzhagen has admitted: "In the *Mimeta* group environmental differences are the rule"; and then dismisses that factor as applied to Australian birds. Meinertzhagen has allowed

"*Oriolus sagittatus sagittatus* (Latham)—distribution, New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria;

"*Oriolus sagittatus affinis* (Gould)—distribution, Northern Territory and North-western Australia; and

"*Oriolus flavocinctus flavocinctus* (King) — distribution, Queensland, Northern Territory, and North-western Australia.

It will be noted that all the Australian sub-species save Gould's are lumped, though the writer admits that the differences can be seen, but adds: "I do not consider such differences warrant separation." He then allows *Oriolus flavocinctus mulleri*, as "the yellow tips to the outer rectrices are smaller," a feature which, in my opinion, certainly does not entitle them to separation if the other characters do not. As a matter of fact, the variation in the yellow tips is quite an inconstant feature, and cannot be relied upon, but the point I wish to emphasise is this: *O. f. mulleri* occurs on Roma Island in the South-west Islands, and *O. f. migrator* is admitted from Letti and Moa, two of the South-west Islands, a group of islets so insignificant that Meinertzhagen is compelled to state their locality "immediately east of Timor." That is, having lumped all the Yellow Orioles ranging over Northern Australia, Meinertzhagen agrees that two sub-species can be found on a small group of islands that is almost unmarked on the map. As a matter of fact, the differences observed by Meinertzhagen in the series of Australian birds examined by him

are more pronounced than the ones used by him for separating the island forms; but Roma is an island, and—so is Australia!!

The numerous forms established from these smaller islands are based on small series, collected at the same time and showing the same plumages, contrasted with similar small series collected at different times of the year on other small islands. Their value is generally problematical, whereas the variation seen in Australian birds, when studied by Australians, may lead to valuable results.

The peculiarity of this treatment may be gauged by the fact that Meinertzhagen is not a lumper when he receives a bird from a new locality, as recently he described as new a form of *Cisticola*, based upon four birds, in moult!

I have recently attended a meeting of British Ornithologists, deliberating upon the status of a sub-species, and over an hour was employed in the examination of series, the only difference being size, and the measurements overlapping. Moreover, it was acknowledged that winter forms might be inseparable under any conditions. Yet the same workers who will thus carefully consider a Palearctic form, dismiss with airy nonchalance an Australian form, because Australia is an island! Consequently, in the future, Australian workers must accumulate material, until they can study all the forms themselves. It is necessary to have good series; a few specimens each year soon mount up, and would make their study more profitable. Even the best collections available on this side show series only of limited extent, and often of few dates. It is quite useless to attempt to do constructive work with a few specimens; it simply means later revision by someone who will naturally find much disagreement.
