

CORRESPONDENCE

Warszawa, October 10, 1966

Working Group of Granivorous Birds, PT Section,
International Biological Programme,
Warszawa, Nowy Swiat 72, Poland.

International Co-operation for the Study of Energy Flow
through Sparrow Populations.

A special meeting was held on July 27, 1966 at the XIV International Ornithological Congress, to organize international co-operation in the study of geographic and climatic variations in the morphological, physiological and ecological adaptations of the House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*, and Tree Sparrow, *P. montanus*, throughout the world. Special attention will be paid to the measurement of energy flow through sparrow populations and their economic meaning in various regions in connection with the International Biological Programme.

Correspondence from persons interested in the project will be welcomed.

Chairman of Committee: Dr. Jan Pinowski.

OUR ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS

To the Editor,
Sir,

In the general interest it is necessary to point out that various errors, of both fact and judgment, occur in the discussion of ornithological field-work in Australia, by W. R. Wheeler (*Emu*, Oct. 1966). Overall, these errors not only mar our records but do serious injustice to many notable figures.

Early in the article it is stated that John Gilbert worked in "Western Australia, South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory". In fact, Gilbert's basic work was done in Tasmania, and moreover he did not operate at all in S.A. and left no record of collecting in the present area of N.S.W. It is also a mistake to say (as is the case twice) that he was killed in July 1845; the date was, of course, June 28.

"Following Gilbert", says the Wheeler review, "came a rather barren period until the 1880s". All readers having knowledge of the records will heartily disagree with this statement. It overlooks the revealing work done soon after Gilbert's day by the resolute Frederick Strange (whose discoveries included the Albert Lyrebird in 1849 and the dainty Pale-yellow Robin soon afterwards); by Dr George Bennett in N.S.W.; by J. W. Beilby, F. J. Williams, and Dr L. Becker in Victoria (for details see my *Romance of the Lyrebird*, 1960); by Charles Coxen and Silvester Diggles in Queensland from about 1850, and by Dr J. R. Elsey (discoverer of the Lilac-crowned Wren and the Golden-shouldered Parrot) dur-

ing the Gregory expedition of 1855-56. Further, the "barren" statement disregards the fruitful activities of quite a number of notable workers of the 1860s, among them John Macgillivray, James Wilcox, and E. P. Ramsay, who functioned in the fertile Richmond River area of N.S.W., and George Masters, who collected intensively in both S.A. and W.A. (Especially did those men of the 1860s study the remarkable *Atrichornis*—see *Emu*, Oct.-Dec. 1951).

Numbers of other names relating to the general period merit reference, but it will probably be sufficient here to point out that, in the 1860s and/or 1870s, a great deal of useful work was done in North Queensland by Samuel White, Edward Spalding, Robert Johnston, E. P. Ramsay, Kendall Broadbent, J. A. Boyd, T. A. Gulliver, and J. T. and J. F. Cockerell. Results included the discovery of such distinctive species as the Tooth-billed Catbird and the Northern Logrunner (*Orthonyx spaldingi*), both named by Ramsay.

"A rather barren period"? With the foregoing data in mind, maybe the most fitting comment on that statement is the bushman's crisp expression, "Well stone the flamin' crows!"

Dr Ramsay, as is generally realised, was a potent force in Australian ornithology for a quarter-century from about 1865—he named many species and personally conducted many excursions—yet in the Wheeler review he rates merely as an "also-ran" in a curiously mixed assortment of names. This haphazard list, it may also be noted, is ascribed to the 1880s, yet it includes names of men (such as S. A. White, W. D. MacGillivray, and E. A. Ashby) who did not become active until many years later. On the other hand, it overlooks competent field-workers of the period, among them K. H. Bennett, probably the best "unofficial" bird-observer of his time in Australia; Robert Grant and E. J. Cairn, who did important work in North Queensland in 1887 and 1889, and T. A. Bowyer-Bower, the plucky young English naturalist who, near Cairns in 1884, discovered the charming Stripe-breasted Thrush (named by Ramsay *Colluricincla boweri*), and who, like Dr Elsey, died of a tropical infection at the age of 24.

As for bird-students of the present century, references to them in the paper under notice include dazzling catalogues of names, and yet they are marred by serious omissions. There is, for example, no allusion to the informative series of articles touching the food of birds published by Walter Froggatt of Sydney. Nor is there any acknowledgment of the outstanding service rendered by Donald Macdonald of Melbourne, who through books and copious writings in various publications was a vital influence, during many years, in stimulating field-study of both fauna and flora over a wide area. A similar consideration obtains in regard to the late lamented *Wildlife* and to the publications and general work of the Gould

League of Bird Lovers in various States, and, accordingly, absence of acknowledgment of their influence is to be deplored.

Regrettably, too, while acclaiming certain books (mainly of recent vintage) the Wheeler discussion has strangely neglected various volumes of significance, some of which have achieved warm popularity. Surely a sentence or two should have been spared for the massive productions of A. J. North and G. M. Mathews, both of which carry numerous field-notes. Surely, as well, there should have been brief reference to the extensive treatment of birds in *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, by W. B. Alexander in the first edition and by various members of the R.A.O.U. in the larger edition of 1958. Individual books unnoticed include those by Robert Hall, E. J. Banfield, S. W. Jackson, J. A. Leach (*An Australian Bird Book*), N. W. Cayley (*What Bird Is That?* and others), R. T. Littlejohns (mainly lyrebirds), A. J. Marshall (bowerbirds), Charles Barrett, and L. G. Chandler. Especially, of course, have the books by Leach and Cayley been potent factors in stimulating field-study—to date, *What Bird Is That?* has sold approximately 140,000 copies—and thus they cannot be omitted from any balanced consideration of the subject.

No less grievous, in my view, is the absence from the Wheeler article of any reference to H. M. Whittell's monumental work, *The Literature of Australian Birds* (1954). This volume, the product of many years of arduous research by a former president of the R.A.O.U., is a bibliographical compilation of first importance—a guide to thousands of books and articles from both field and study—and the lack of allusion to it in a review of Australian ornithological writings can only be regarded as unjust to the point of absurdity. It should, indeed, have been closely consulted for the purpose of the paper under notice.

Further to the matter of books and booklets, I suggest that when mentioning his own (projected) *Handlist of the Birds of Victoria*, Mr Wheeler should not have awarded it, by implication, pioneering status, but, rather, should have acknowledged earlier enterprises of the kind. First, there was that of John Cotton, Victoria's basic birdman-writer-artist (grandfather of the ornithologists Dudley Le Souef and Sir Charles Ryan and great-grandfather of Lady Casey), who in the late 1840s made a gallant attempt to produce a book on the birds of his colony but died before completing the task. Secondly, there was J. A. Leach's booklet of 1908, *A Descriptive List of the Birds Native to Victoria, Australia*, a guide which I personally found in youthful days to be extremely helpful.

In point of fact, my sense of personal obligation to the early writings of Leach and Macdonald, and of Hall, Barrett, and Banfield as well, is one of the reasons animating this letter. But, of course, the broader consideration is the need to emphasize, particularly to younger readers, that in any historical or semi-historical review of any phase of ornithology (as in other subjects)

the writer has a responsibility to avoid hit-or-miss methods and to give adequate and accurate attention to all records of significance.

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The Editor,
Sir,

Swifts and Atmospheric Disturbances

I must thank Mr S. Marchant (1966) for his references to Swifts. But do those really help in explaining the large congregations of Swifts in South Australia occasionally seen in association with a storm? Surely my meteorological notes are of value in this case. As records in the *S.A. Ornithologist* (1966) show, a few Swifts are occasionally seen in various parts of South Australia in the summer months but the local population is negligible or for most of the summer non-existent. Where do the Swifts come from which suddenly appear in such large numbers? Hawking must surely mean that they are obtaining food as they circle round. The two I shot at Encounter Bay on January 11, 1928, contained in their stomachs a surprising variety of insects (as recorded in my letter). All of these must have been carried into the circumambient air by gusts of wind. These birds were not contending against unfavourable weather conditions and were not flying against the wind.

South Australia has a long hot dry summer with heat waves and cool changes and occasional thunderstorms. During that summer I presume that most insects aestivate, so that a strong hot north wind, except in the early part of the summer, has little likelihood of lifting any appreciable number of moths, beetles, diptera, etc. into the air. Ants, termites and some diptera ascend into the air in nuptial swarming—surely an excellent source of food. Locusts, migrating in search of food, are I suppose too large for Swifts to use. Swifts would thus find no food available for them on most of our summer days, except in the early part of the summer, the carry-over of spring, and when these nuptial flights occur. The large numbers of Swifts seen on these occasions must have come, most of them at least, from outside South Australia. How did they know that food was available here? Did they follow a food trail or were they guided by some "instinct", allied to, or perhaps even the same as that that governs migration from Asia? This is an entomological problem as much as an ornithological one. We want to know:

- (1) Whether insects in general aestivate in late summer in South Australia so that those suitable as food for Swifts would not be available to be blown accidentally by gusts of wind into the air?
- (2) Over what period of the year do ants, termites, hymenoptera and diptera swarm into the air to be blown perhaps far afield by the wind?

- (3) What insects are actually being caught by the Swifts when so congregated? This, unfortunately, means shooting a few birds.

From the ornithological point of view one would like to know over how many areas, or square miles, the congregation of Swifts extends. Valuable information could be obtained if, during the next visitations here, some one telephoned to adjacent areas to enquire whether the Swifts were hawking there at the same time. It would be of great interest to know whether there were just small local flocks moving along or whether the congregation was concurrent over some square miles.

I have thought on some of these occasions when the congregation has been towards evening, of trying to follow the Swifts to see where and how they spent the night.

REFERENCES

South Australian Ornithologist (1966), 24 (6): 105.

Marchant S. (1966). Weather movements in Swifts, *Emu* 66: 68.

JOHN B. CLELAND,
Adelaide.

To the Editor,

Sir,

I am very grateful to Mr F. Stewart for bringing to my attention other references to the use of the foot in feeding by Muscicapinae species (*Emu* 66: 65-66). Reference was recently found to the use of the foot in this manner by the New Zealand Black Flycatcher, *Rhipidura fuliginosa*, in E. F. Stead's *Life histories of New Zealand birds* and from the accumulating evidence it seems that this feeding method is a typical character of the Fantail Flycatchers (*Rhipidurini*). The reference by Hyem (*Emu* 36: 109-127) to the use of the foot in holding insects as a character of all the "flycatchers" is unsatisfactory in the lack of detail and insofar as he does not define what species he includes in this, the number of species regarded as flycatchers having varied from time to time. I doubt if Hyem intended to include all the species which Mr Stewart lists as possibilities. The only species other than the Fantail Flycatchers for which Hyem gives detailed evidence is the Black-faced Flycatcher, *Monarcha melanopsis*, and this appears to be the first record of a monarchine flycatcher feeding in this fashion. Other observations and confirmations of this habit are needed. Field observers should remember that there is a possibility that a bird feeding on a large winged insect might appear to hold it through accidentally standing on some part of it. What is needed is evidence of a deliberate use of the foot to hold food, preferably seen on more than one occasion, and for other passerine species in addition to, flycatchers.

Yours sincerely,

S. A. PARKER