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PURCHASED

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OF THE

## BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB



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The five hundred and ninety-ninth meeting of the Club was held at the Rembrandt Hotel, London, on 15th May, 1962.

*Chairman:* CAPTAIN C. R. S. PITMAN

Members present: 24; guests 4; total 28.

The Chairman welcomed Dr. Rudyerd Boulton, Dr. Herbert Friedmann and Mr. A. R. Tribe.

### Exhibition of a hybrid duck

Dr. J. M. Harrison exhibited and commented upon a Red Shoveler X Northern Shoveler (*Anas platalea* x *A. clypeata*). A paper on this specimen will be published in the *Bulletin*.

The breeding of the Lily-trotter or Jacana (*Actophilornis africanus*) in Kenya was the main feature of a film for which the Chairman provided a commentary. There were also excellent sequences of the White-backed Duck (*Thalassornis leuconotus*) at the nest, the Red-knobbed Coot (*Fulica cristata*) and other birds inhabiting the lake.

### Further reflections on the British List

by ALLAN R. PHILLIPS

*Received 21st November, 1961*

Excellent as they are, the comments of Fitter and others (*Bull. B.O.C.* 81: 93-95, 1961) do not reach the heart of the problems involved, chief among which is the need of a clear distinction between scientific data and mere speculation. The former are data that have been and *can be verified*: specimens available for re-examination by competent taxonomists at any time. Specimens once available and examined by a capable taxonomist should, I believe, also receive credence, though of course their loss is regrettable. Anything else is unverifiable, as far as technical details are concerned, and can only be classified as speculative.

Even with specimens, the question of escaped birds is, as we all know,



a difficult one. We should therefore urge that not only the skin of a rarity, but also its *body*, should be preserved for study by specialists. Thus search can be made for any abnormalities produced by captivity. It is most desirable that all aviculturists should co-operate by keeping all their birds clearly marked in case of escape. Nevertheless, the escape hazard has been exaggerated.

The taxonomist can sometimes throw light on this question of possible escapes. For example, a Kiskadee Flycatcher, *Pitangus sulphuratus* (Linn.), was once collected in California. Local bird students claimed, naturally, an accidental occurrence from the distant Mexico/Texas range of the species, which is absent from the adjacent parts of the south-western United States. But an alert taxonomist noted certain discrepancies, and the bird was found to be of a South American race, obviously escaped from captivity!

Fitter exaggerates the doubtful elements in specimen records. Few will agree that it is a "fact that no individual record can be 100% certain for all time". To mention but a single one, there is the well known American Bittern, *Botaurus lentiginosus* (Montagu), described by two different authors from Dorset. *Any and all* specimen records are 100% certain for all time if they fulfil the requisites of science: (1) the collector is trustworthy; (2) the possibility of escape has been ruled out; and (3) the identification has been verified by competent taxonomists. The museums of the world are full of 100% certain records, most of which appear in the various regional check-lists and elsewhere in the literature. My own collection contains dozens of specimens which, at the time, appeared to be accidental occurrences, though several have since become regular or even common species in their respective localities. (For some such cases, see *Auk* 57: 117-118; *Condor* 51: 137-139, 52: 78-81, 55: 99-100, and 59: 140-141). Nearly all of my accidental specimens were personally collected and prepared, and all represent 100% certain records for all time, once published. It is true that many older specimens, and not a few newer ones, were very poorly or even inaccurately labelled; the older museums, and those modern ones that are supplied by ordinary, unreliable professional collectors, contain specimens which cannot withstand a critical investigation (of the accuracy of their data) and others which are misidentified. Nevertheless, as the late Dr. Joseph Grinnell said, a specimen preserved and *properly labelled at the time* is a scientific document; and no matter how long it may lie in a museum drawer unrecognized its true identity will eventually come to light. Witness Dr. Friedmann's discovery of the earliest specimen of Baer's Pochard, *Aythya baeri* (Radde), an accidental from north-western America which had lain unrecognized for over a century in the United States National Museum.

It is, incidentally, by no means so difficult to preserve a specimen as many ornithologists seem to think. We often read of birds found in too poor condition to preserve; but this is never the case, really. Often they cannot be made into first-rate skins, but enough can *always* be saved to establish the record. Perfectly acceptable skins have been made from birds found mashed in highways or riddled by shot. In the case of birds, particularly non-passerines, *without* close relatives, the trunk skeleton should preferably be saved as well, and indeed if the bird is long dead a



full skeleton is the best way of preserving it; however, the remiges, rectrices, tarsi and toes should be preserved intact (not skeletonized). Where identification is more critical, in groups with many similar species, a skin or partial skin should be saved; feathers in place, but loosened and about to fall, may be salvaged by prompt application to their bases of a good glue or of one of the preparations used by paleontologists to strengthen crumbly fossils. At least, the wings, tail, head and feet can normally be preserved without difficulty. Preservation by injection and immersion in strong alcohol or formalin is not generally desirable due to the loss of colour values which precludes later critical evaluation, as for example subspecific comparisons. Anatomical studies should be made on more suitable material.

It is my contention, then, that an ornithologist wishing to claim any record as *scientific* evidence usually can and should preserve a specimen and submit it for proper identification. We all know of specimens in the hand that have been misidentified; why then should we be asked to place more faith in the identification of rarities seen at a distance, or perhaps handled by one who is unfamiliar with abnormal plumages, hybrids and the true taxonomic characters of the group involved? Such evidence can *never* be verified. As one who has probably found as many "accidentals" as any living ornithologist, the great majority of which are preserved for study, I may perhaps be permitted to question the alleged "immense recent increase in skill in field identification" so generally believed. To be sure, our binoculars, telescopes, and books are better than those we once had, but occasionally our "rare" bird proves to be a freak of some common species, or a hybrid. Those bird students who do not habitually collect, handle and identify specimens *cannot possibly know* whether they are right or wrong; they have no way of learning the tricks played by light, distance, moult, feather wear, accidental loss of feathers, dwarfism, albinism, erythrism, melanism, hybridization, etc. This is not a matter of any one observer, photographer, or netter; we can readily grant that a bird showed certain markings, if several observers saw them, but we still do not know details on which a correct determination may rest. I therefore cannot agree that dubious records of "extreme rarities" have any value, much less consider them "especially valuable". I have known too many cases of birds being placed in the wrong *family* by allegedly expert bird-students whose field experience had never been tempered by judicious collecting.

The barriers to collecting of rare birds should be removed. Can anyone imagine that a vagrant, even in the unlikely case that it should survive to breed, would make the slightest difference in the survival of its local population, much less its race and species? The loss to science in not being able to identify the bird accurately is not balanced by the slightest gain to the species. The place for the identification of suspected extra-limital species is in the museum, with adequate series for comparison.

Dr. Loye Miller aptly compares many distributions of animals to waves on a beach. Their numbers fluctuate from year to year; in good years they spread out to occupy sub-marginal habitats, while in bad years they are to be found only where conditions are especially favourable. Superimposed on this, some groups show tidal effects, spreading out



more and more into previously unoccupied territory or withdrawing from parts of the former range. In none of these cases will the collecting of one or a few individuals have the slightest effect on the ultimate outcome. The only birds that have ever been seriously affected by direct hunting by man are (1) very large birds, persecuted for their flesh, feathers, or (by game-keepers) to eliminate predation or supposed possible predation; (2) exceptionally gregarious birds, of which whole flocks could be wiped out at once and (3) flightless birds, particularly those that could be driven onto ships to supply fresh meat. In general, these are exactly the types of birds that scientists have *not* collected to any extent.

Attempts to protect rare birds by prohibiting collecting have been almost universal failures. In Arizona, for example, of the four species long prohibited, two have never since appeared in the state while the other two appear irregularly. On the other hand, locally very rare birds without such restrictions have, in all cases, maintained their numbers and indeed often spread out in spite of the loss of occasional individuals to a collector.

If, then, the real object of prohibiting collecting were to aid the birds rather than to hinder science, such prohibition would be limited to breeding or possibly breeding birds during the season of eggs and dependent young, and would include bans on disturbance by non-collectors as well. The real threat to birds today is the constant destruction of their habitat, as every ornithologist knows so well. In the future, then, the usefulness or uselessness of nature conservancies and other conservation groups will surely be judged by their effectiveness in conserving important habitats, not their anti-scientific activities. It is high time that these well-meaning organizations awoke to the fundamental fact that birds are not men nor elephants; an average bird lives two or three years, so that the survival of any population depends on its ability to nest successfully in nearly every year—a function of the habitat and of freedom from disturbance, either by man or by an over abundant natural enemy such as the over numerous gulls now so unwisely protected in some areas.

All of this, then, supports the conclusion that ornithology can and should continue to be a *science*. I would therefore suggest that Fitter's Part I, "the scientifically most important part", should include *all* the scientific data, *i.e.* all the data based on specimens, from which all non-specimen data are to be *clearly distinguished*. Part II can then contain the speculative species, based on more or less doubtful specimens, probable escapes, introduced birds that have not established themselves, field observations, etc., which the Committee feels to be worth mentioning.

One final comment: the Committee need not worry so greatly about assisted passages from North America. Why, of all the ships plying the world's seas, do only these carry birds, and why only at certain times?

### Further notes on some bird/other animal associations in Africa

by CHARLES R. S. PITMAN

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During a visit to the Masai Amboseli Game Reserve in Kenya in September 1961, a young elephant feeding in the shallows at the edge of a





Phillips, A R. 1962. "Further reflections on the British list." *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 82, 97–100.

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