"EGG COLLECTOR COLLECTED"

This was the title of W. R. P. Bourne's article in the June 28, 1974, issue of Nature, the leading British science journal. In it he related how Charles Sibley, now of Yale and a vice-president of the American Ornithologists's Union, was recently fined $3,000 under the Lacey Act for six counts of "illegally importing bird parts taken abroad in violation of foreign wild life laws." In this case, the "bird parts" were eggs, presumably for use in Prof. Sibley's electrophoretic analyses of egg-white proteins.

In the June 16th British Sunday Times, Sibley defended his action by stating that "the idea that taking a few eggs could endanger a species is the most ridiculous thing you could imagine." Dr. Bourne further relates that Sibley ignored the law because he felt that it was unjust, imposed by emotional bird conservation groups.

Bourne also notes that "a conspiracy of silence" exists concerning the collecting practices of North American ornithologists. He writes: "for example the senior ornithological journal [presumably the AOU 's Auk] has refused to publish any comments on reports that specimens of the first Little Gulls Larus minutus and Wood Sandpipers Tringa minutus found nesting in North America were promptly collected despite the fact that they are easily recognized and that there was already ample material available."

A response to Dr. Bourne's article appeared in the October 25th issue of Nature. The author, J. B. Tatum of the University of Victoria, makes some suggestions concerning collecting practices that are worth considering.

"One might imagine that no ornithologist would raise any serious objection to a code that asked a collector to state, when applying for a permit, the nature of the scientific research he was engaged upon; what new information and understanding about avian biology he expected to gain from a study of his specimens; what species he required and how many; whether such information could be gained from a study of pre-existing specimens; and whether his collecting was likely to harm any population .... Yet this suggestion has been repeatedly rejected by ornithologists in North America. Applicants are not obliged to state which species they wish to collect, open permits are issued without specifying which species may be shot or how many, and their holders may shoot any birds regardless of whether they are engaged in research on them or not."

One of the most notorious recent instances of questionable collecting concerned a family of Black-capped Gnatcatchers. Discovered in Arizona on June 15, 1971, this species was a first for the United States list. Within seven days the adults, three fledglings, one infertile egg, and the nest had been collected by ornithologists from the University of Arizona. Previously, the troop had been photographed, tape-recorded, mist-netted, and measured.

The justification given for collecting was that the accumulated data "were inadequate for the conclusive identification of both adult birds, especially the female ...." (Auk, Vol. 90, No. 2, page 258). On the other hand, one of the authors of that article, William Harrison, stated (Birding, Vol. IV, No. 1, page 43) that "there was a strong possibility that they represented a hybridizing pair." These comments and others leave one rather uncertain about the actual motive; I can only suggest that the original articles be carefully read.

Nevertheless, why was it necessary to collect the young to answer these questions. Had the fledglings been left alone, they might have formed the nucleus for an endemic population in the United States.

Arnold Small made this poignant comment in Birding, Vol. III, No. 4, page 104: "Perhaps for a short while this little group constituted the entire nesting population of this species within the United States. This would classify it as one of the rarest of American birds. We do not know if there are others, but this is of no consequence because at the time there were no other known groups. Hence, what might have been a pioneer pair (?) that had almost succeeded in establishing a significant range extension [about 150 miles northward] was exterminated before it had a chance to succeed... The license to kill or capture wild birds for scientific endeavors seems to abrogate the 'rights' of birders or even the 'rights' of the birds themselves. Would these collectors have taken the last remnants of the Carolina Parakeet or the now biologically extinct California Brown Pelican?"

Though most birders will not be able to judge scientifically individual cases of

collecting practices, they might -- as a lobby -- demand that open discussions be carried out among representatives of ornithological, environmental, and governmental groups. Such deliberations could result in specific ground rules, established in the light of current knowledge, defining what is necessary to advance our understanding of birds.

As an astronomer, I know that an applicant for observing time on one of the world's giant telescopes must answer questions analogous to those proposed by Dr. Tatum. Is it unfair to ask scientists in another discipline to do as much -- especially when life is involved?

L. J. Robinson

THE SEABIRDS OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND, Stanley Cramp, W. R. P. Bourne, David Saunders; Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., New York, New York, 287 pages, $14.95.

I have been awaiting the publication of this book for some time, as it is the first of a new generation of works based on the detailed breeding surveys of large areas carried out by hundreds or even thousands of birdwatchers and compiled by professionals of proven competence. It deals with the seabirds of my native British Isles, and I am able to confirm the accuracy of its information from many visits to these colonies in Eire, England, Scotland and Wales. I found the book not only factually correct, but also very readable.

The first chapter, on the biology of seabirds, by Dr. Bourne, is a brief section with numerous references for further reading. It summarizes flight and feeding techniques, breeding, and the general distribution of seabirds (with an emphasis on the North Atlantic). There is also discussion of ocean currents, winds, and areas of maximum food supply.

"Threats to Seabirds" by Stanley Cramp, is a concise summary of the serious effects of man and his pollution. The chapter traces recent ecological history from the first Protection Act of Parliament in 1869 to limit hunting, through the first oil spill in 1907, to the present day. Topics include a discussion of the present state of our knowledge about such chemicals as organochlorines and toxic metals.

The main part of the book presents the results of "Operation Seafarer," which was planned by The Seabird Group and directed by a Census Committee, and which involved almost every major ornithological society in the two countries. The third co-author of this book, David Saunders, was the full time organizer of the census in 1969 and 1970, and this section contains much of the information gathered by The Seabird Group since its foundation in 1956. The objectives were simple:

1. Find out where the 24 species of common seabirds nest in the British Isles.

2. Estimate, as accurately as possible, their present numbers to provide a baseline from which to document future changes.

After an introductory chapter by Stanley Cramp on "Present Numbers and Changing Fortunes," the rest of the book is taken up by the 24 sections on the separate species: Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, 2 storm-petrels, Gannet, 2 cormorants, 2 skuas (jaegers), 11 gulls and terns and 4 auks. For each species there are sections on identification, food and feeding habits, breeding, movements, world distribution, and known past history. The 32 maps which follow the text present the breeding survey results in an easily assimilated form, showing species distribution, colony size, etc. (The precise location of certain "sensitive" colonies is not given for obvious (and good) reasons.) Following the 24 species accounts are 59 pages of appendices and further references.

The text is illustrated throughout with numerous excellent line drawings by Robert Gillmor. There are 11 photographs of seabirds and colonies and many maps. I feel that the serious birdwatcher who is likely to buy this book could have managed without Gillmor's 4 color plates; he would be fairly familiar with the fieldmarks anyway. Omission of these plates might have helped to lower the price from its rather steep $14.95. However, the wealth of detail in the results of this very comprehensive survey, plus the copious references, make this book an essential buy for anybody with more than a passing interest in North Atlantic seabirds.

Trevor L. Lloyd-Evans, Manomet Bird Observatory