

RECENT LITERATURE.

Mathews' 'Check List of the Birds of Australia, Part I.'¹—Having reached the half-way point in his great work on the birds of Australia, Mr. Mathews publishes a list of all the species so far treated, with the synonymy of each and references to his own plates and those of Gould. He explains that while the work was in progress so many questions relating to the proper names for the various species were under discussion, that the names used on the plates are in many cases not those that he would use today. Hence the need of a list of present day names with the proper concordance.

As Mr. Mathews' work progressed there has been noticeable a constantly lessening degree of importance attached to the subspecies, until now they have reached a condition of degradation that will delight the hearts of certain of his Australian friends who for some years past have been complaining of the tremendous increase in the number of "kinds" of birds that he has named. Mr. Mathews explains that "the number of subspecies accepted must always be a variable one, according to the material available and to a certain extent upon the personal idiosyncrasy of the worker," and therefore he thinks that a list of the species only, with the subspecies arranged under them will be of more general use. As a matter of fact he lists the subspecies along with synonyms etc., so that it is absolutely impossible to tell from the list how many he intends to recognize. Some are in binomial form, others in trinomial and some of each class he accepts while others he rejects. Never the less this list, as he says, will probably be of more general use than any of its predecessors.

A very valuable feature is the determination of the exact date of publication of each name as nearly as it is possible to ascertain it, as well as the place and method of the type fixation of each genus.

In the preface Mr. Mathews has a brief defence of his attitude on generic subdivision in which he claims not to be an extreme splitter. His comparison with the work of the B. O. U. Committee does not seem to us very well taken and the fact that of the 279 genera that he considers are necessary for the 334 species listed, he has had to establish at least sixty that were not deemed necessary by any writers up to the time of the 'British Museum Catalogue'—and sometime after—seems to stamp him as rather an extremist in the matter of generic division. Mr. Mathews certainly shows commendable perseverance in his efforts to make his generic division consistent but the point is that a large majority of scientific workers do not concede the necessity for such effort when our nomen-

¹Supplement No. 1. The Birds of Australia. By Gregory M. Mathews. Check-List of the Birds of Australia, Part I. Orders Casuariiformes to Menuriformes. London: Witherby & Co., 326 High Holborn, W. C. I. February 16, 1920, pp. 1-116.

clature is, by the process, rendered meaningless except to the favored few. The reviewer has already expressed at length his view that the groups demanded by consistency or for phylogenetic purposes can just as well be expressed as subgenera without making a plaything of our nomenclature. (Science, April 20, 1920, p. 427.) Generic subdivision seems to us, to quote Mr. Mathews' expression, even more a matter of "personal idiosyncrasy" than the coining of subspecies. We are all agreed with Mr. Mathews on the importance of recognizing differences (and resemblances too!) but it should and can be done without inconveniencing everyone else. As the instructions to the binder suggest the binding of this "Part" at the end of Volume VII we infer that "Part 2" will not appear until the work is entirely completed, by which time let us hope that our good friend the author will have adopted the same conservative stand upon genera that he has now reached in regard to subspecies.—W. S.

Mathews' 'Birds of Australia'.¹—Part I of Volume VIII appeared on May 5, 1920, and in it Mr. Mathews begins the treatment of the long list of passerine birds. The Pittidae, Atrichornithidae and Hirundinidae are completed in this number and the first species of the Muscipidae are considered.

A rather lengthy discussion of the classification of the Passeriformes begins the number which is well worth careful reading. While the author does not advance any new ideas in the classification which he adopts, he presents some rather caustic criticism of characters used and diagnoses of groups, presented by others. His principal grievance seems to be with the importance accorded to anatomical characters and after quoting a diagnosis of the family Picidae: "Feet zygodactyle; after-shaft small or elementary; oil-gland tufted. Muscle formula of leg, AXY (AX); gall bladder elongated; skull without basipterygoid processes," he says: "Surely it is time to provide some more reasonable kind of guide to bird study than such inadequate terminology," and again in referring to anatomical terms he says that they "mean little or nothing to the ornithologist who has to deal with skins and not much more to anyone else."

While we are willing to admit Mr. Mathews' contention that too much weight may have been given to certain anatomical characters and that even the structure of the syrinx in the Pittidae may not necessarily indicate any close relationship to Neotropical groups with similar structure, but may merely indicate degeneration in both instances from "oscine" types; there is still no reason why they may not have come from the same stock and represent isolated groups of a widespread type now approaching extinction. Mr. Mathews does not think, moreover, that similarity in syrinx structure should be held to unite such dissimilar-looking birds as the

¹The Birds of Australia, Witherly & Co. Vol. VIII. Part 1, May 5, 1920.