

CORRESPONDENCE.

Extirpation of the Azorean Bullfinch.

Editor of 'The Auk':

We have recently received, through the courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History, a report¹ on "A Collection of Birds from the Azores" by our friends Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy and Dr. James P. Chapin of the American Museum of Natural History.

In this report the authors have unwittingly reopened a thorny question which has been the subject of controversy in the past, and has now reached, in our opinion, an acute stage where drastic action should be taken. We refer to the repeated collecting of specimens for Museums of species which are admittedly on the verge of extinction, but which could, if proper means were taken, be saved from the fate which threatens them.

The case in point which will serve equally as an instance for many others is that of the Azorean Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula murina* Godman). We will briefly sketch the history of this bird in its island home and let the facts speak for themselves.

The Azorean Bullfinch is first mentioned in literature by Pucheran (Rev. et Mag. Zool. 1859, pp. 409-414), who had recently received a specimen of the "Bouvreuil" from M. Morelet. This last gentleman published in 1860 his 'Histoire Naturelle des Açores' in which he discusses the status of the Bullfinch but erroneously believed it to be a migrant from Spain. Drouet in 'Faune Açoréennë,' 1861, remarked that during his sojourn on the Island of San Miguel in 1857 in company with his companion Morelet they found the Bullfinch "Abondant alors et très-destructeur."

Bocage's 'Ornithologia dos Açores' adds nothing to our knowledge up to date, but from F. Du Cane Godman (who was the first naturalist to describe and name it *murina*) we have Drouet's statement of its status confirmed. It was evidently numerous in 1865 for Godman "shot thirteen individuals in the same poplar tree in a few minutes" (!) (Ibis, 1866, p. 98), and in his 'Natural History of the Azores,' 1870, remarks "since my return to England *nineteen* additional specimens have been sent me." According to his own observations the bird is "confined to the mountainous parts of St. Michael's, where it is tolerably abundant." We may pass over Simroth's account 'Archiv für Naturgeschichte' 1888, p. 185, for he does not appear to have added to the destruction and pass to the visit of Ogilvie-Grant to the Archipelago in 1903. The results of this expedition were published by Hartert and Ogilvie-Grant in 'Novitates Zoologicae' xii, 1905, and on p. 125 Ogilvie-Grant wrote, "This Bullfinch, by far the most interesting bird met with in the Azores, though plentiful enough when first discovered by Mr. Godman, is now very scarce, and *its extermination is*

¹ American Museum Novitates, No. 384, Nov. 6, 1929.

probably only a matter of a few years (itals. ours). Its range was apparently always a very restricted one, being limited to . . . etc. Major Chaves¹ informed us that formerly he had sent many skins of this bird to the various Museums in Europe, but that of late years he had been unable to procure any more specimens . . ." Quoting a local resident—Senhor Jeronymo—Ogilvie-Grant continues,—“he could remember the time when it was no uncommon sight to see twenty or more at one time on a peach tree.” adding,—“. . . the fact remains that this very local bird must soon disappear, and as there seemed no chance of saving them from the fruit-farmer we felt no compunction in securing such specimens as we met with.” We shall revert to this sentence later. Twelve specimens were finally secured.

It is apparent already from the accounts quoted that the Azorean Bullfinch was, at the date of which we write, (1903) fighting for its very existence, and as it is described by all who know it as—to use Godman's words—“so tame that it takes but little notice of the report of a gun”—its chance of surviving seemed hopeless.

From 1903 until 1907 the little band remaining was allowed to go in peace as far as collectors were concerned, the local farmer at whose door its imminent extermination is now laid, was presumably just as active in his methods of destruction then as he is now, but let us see what happened. Left to the tender mercies of the fruit-farmer and without the assistance of the collector—the Bullfinch increased in its stronghold to such an extent that by 1907—a period of but four years from the date when Ogilvie-Grant believed it to be on the verge of extinction—an Austrian collector slaughtered in the space of eight weeks no less than fifty-three specimens of this beautiful species, in this case for sheer greed of £. s. d.

It fell to one of us to draw attention to this atrocity in a letter to ‘The Ibis’ 1908, p. 198, and it was there pointed out that if not already doomed by this last deplorable slaughter the Bullfinch could even then be saved from extermination.

We had hoped against hope that it might be allowed to remain in peace, for what possible gain to science can there be in the destruction of a single further specimen. Above all we have looked to our colleagues in America to hold sacred such a bird as this—to reply that it is doomed at the hands of the fruit-farmer we have already shown to be a fallacy! We have both had experience in Spanish and Portuguese islands and know that no peasant will waste a cartridge on a Bullfinch unless he is sure of payment for the skin—and how many *can* skin! To save his fruit blossom he will certainly not fire a shot!

To read Dr. Murphy's and Dr. Chapin's account of a collector's recent exploits in San Miguel is to make us wonder if the preservation of bird life threatened with imminent extermination is indeed so dear to the heart of the American nation as we are constantly asked to believe. Senhor Correia

¹ A well known resident in the islands who interested himself in Natural History.

offered one dollar for each Bullfinch "but the man demanded two, so Correia went off to try his luck alone." The melancholy tale ends in the destruction of five more Bullfinches, all, in fact, that could be found—and this illuminating sentence;—"Many of the people of Furnas stated that they had not seen a *prido* for ten years, and some of the younger folk, who knew the bird by reputation, asked to examine Correia's specimens."

Sir, is this an exploit to be proud of and to chronicle without a word of regret in the valuable 'American Museum Novitates'? Surely the days have gone by when we can boast of exploits such as Senhor Correia's, where no stone was left unturned by bribery or strategy to obtain as many skins as possible of a bird which Senhor Correia, from his own showing, knew to be perhaps the last of its kind! Senhor Correia is an experienced collector who has done much valuable work for the American Museum in the past—and he knew well what he was about, but in all fairness to the authorities of the American Museum we must add that Correia's visit to the Azores "was purely personal."

Now Sir, this is not a personal indictment of the conduct of a single individual and we need hardly add that it is not directed against the American Museum of Natural History. We hold no brief for our own countrymen and we consider the statement that, if a species is verging on extermination we are justified in collecting all the specimens we can—an entirely mischievous doctrine to preach—although doubtless made in all good faith at the time and without the knowledge now at our disposal. Moreover, we believe that the detailed manner in which the habitat of the Bullfinch has been described by British ornithologists has led to the inevitable result, but is there to be no end to this greed for collecting vanishing species—especially on islands? Have we not reached the stage when we have learned all that there is to learn from skins and specimens? America is taking the lead in so many matters of vital welfare to the people of Europe. May not we beg of her great Museums to help us preserve rather than to destroy the precious Avifauna which remains to us? We confidently believe that it is in their hands, for alas! there are many "Azorean Bullfinches" struggling for preservation. If all American Museums take their tithe of our vanishing fauna what can we hope to save! If, in the case of this Bullfinch, we have reached a stage at which we have learnt all that can be learned from its mere skin and feathers, what possible scientific result is to be gained by the acquisition of constantly repeated series of specimens which cannot throw any further light on facts already well known?

We do not wish this letter to be merely a condemnation of present day collecting methods but rather that it should draw attention to the urgent need of co-operation between America and ourselves if the vanishing avifauna is to be preserved.

The signatories of this letter are both field-collectors of some experience and fully realize the joy of obtaining a rare specimen for an institution of which we are justly proud. One of us has under his charge the greatest

collection in the world. We both realize the value of such a collection to science, but we realize even more fully the urgent need, indeed the duty, of preserving *alive* for future generations the bird life which is threatened with extermination in so many parts of the world. It is not enough for Great Britain to preserve the fauna of its own possessions or America the fauna of the States, with active co-operation between us we believe that we can save many species which would otherwise be threatened with extermination. Without American sympathy and co-operation our single efforts would be well-nigh hopeless.

We are, Sirs,

Your Obedient Servants,

PERCY R. LOWE,

Hon. Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union.

DAVID A. BANNERMAN.

Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union.

British Museum (Natural History), London. S. W. 7.

6th December, 1929.

Thinking that Drs. Murphy and Chapin would desire to comment upon the above and feeling that it would be preferable to have their remarks appear at this time instead of waiting until the July issue the Editor submitted a copy of the above to them and received the following reply.

Editor of 'The Auk':

With all the sentiment, and most of the comments, expressed in the letter from Dr. Lowe and Mr. Bannerman, no one interested in the conservation of wild life can take issue. If, however, their communication is destined to have a practical effect upon the preservation of the Azorian Bullfinch, they and other naturalists will have to thank the very paper in which the current status of this unfortunate bird is chronicled "without one word of regret."

Directly or indirectly two great British natural history museums have been involved in killing many of the bullfinches of San Miguel. In connection with the latest instance of which we know, that of Ogilvie-Grant in 1903, it was recorded, quite unregretfully, that since this very local bird had no chance of being saved from the fruit-farmer, "we felt no compunction in securing such specimens as we met with." After this the bird was forgotten, and abandoned to the mercy of the fruit-growers, until a later collector, at whom a reproving finger might be pointed, appeared on the scene.

The whole history of the Azorian Bullfinch, as related in the works cited by Dr. Lowe and Mr. Bannerman, is that of a creature wiped out by the native residents of San Miguel, and not by persons interested in preserving specimens. So far as we know, there is no demonstrable basis for the

statement of our friends and critics that the Bullfinch "increased in its stronghold" between 1903 and 1907. Let it be recalled that the collector who quite outrageously slaughtered fifty-three specimens during the latter year spent eight weeks in so doing. Correia obtained his five birds during the course of only four days in the field, and at the least favorable season. It is not unlikely that the Bullfinch may still be saved if the government authorities of the Azores will legislate to protect it from its human enemies, both fruit-growers and collectors. Until such steps are under way, there is hardly ground for condemning ornithologists who would prefer to see the last examples of the species preserved in a museum of world-scope rather than rotting under a peach tree.

The keeper of the greatest bird collection in the world is in a position to know with what zealous care the treasures of that collection are guarded and retained—what a large reserve must exist under his charge before the authorities are willing to regard any of the material as "duplicate," and subject to be released for enriching the collections of sister educational institutions. Yet younger museums, which are also centers of active ornithological research, likewise feel the need for an adequate representation of the earth's avifauna, although none would wish to attain its ideal at the sacrifice of a single species that might otherwise be saved in its natural range.

So far as one can judge from published records, there seem to be approximately one hundred and fifty specimens of the Azorian Bullfinch preserved in European collections; in America the grand total may be as many as eight!

Your correspondents have been kind enough to note that the incident with which they find fault did not take place on an American Museum expedition. In justice to Mr. Correia, we must add that he was under no untoward inducement to collect the Azorian Bullfinch. He knew that we lacked and wished to obtain specimens, but he received for them the same price paid for Blackbirds, Serins and other common species of the islands. He had planned to obtain a Bullfinch or two during an earlier visit, but had been repeatedly informed that it was too late. In November, 1927, he was somewhat sardonically challenged by the curator of the museum at Ponta Delgada to find a single one of these finches. Correia accepted this challenge, with the result that we know at least that the species is not extinct. Under the circumstances here outlined, we fail to discern his serious culpability. Will Dr. Lowe and Mr. Bannerman now join us in the one effort that might prove practicable, namely that of seconding our petition of the Portuguese authorities that the Bullfinch of San Miguel be accorded special and rigid protection?

ROBERT CUSHMAN MURPHY
JAMES P. CHAPIN

New York,
Jan. 14, 1930.