

## CORRESPONDENCE

EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':—

In the review of my book, 'Cuckoo Problems,' which appeared in 'The Auk' of January, 1943, pp. 113-117, there are one or two points upon which I should be glad if you will allow me to comment.

On p. 114, paragraph one, the reviewer quotes extracts from my introduction, the general trend of which gives the impression that he considers I have accepted any eggs from any collector and have also accepted any data given as proven. If this were really the case the book would be utterly worthless and the deductions drawn and opinions expressed equally so.

As a matter of fact, however, I have exercised the greatest care in discriminating between good, bad, and indifferent evidence and my eggs, such as were not taken by myself, were taken by persons of repute who, though in many cases "amateurs," were Field Ornithologists of great ability and very wide experience, whose evidence can be accepted without any hesitation. A list of practically every one of these collectors is given on p. xii of my introduction, all of whom are, or were, well known in their own areas of work while many of them are, or were, equally well known outside them.

Next, the reviewer comments on my "Indian collectors" and says that he himself has had "ample experience" of such collectors but he does not say whether he has ever met a Khasia or Hill Tribesman. He does not refer to my remark on p. xi on the plainsman, to the effect that they cannot be relied on. I wrote, "This may be true of Plains Indians who have no interest in nature observation, but it is not correct of Hill Tribesmen whose life may depend on the proper understanding of the habits and calls of birds and animals."

Of eggs taken by Plains Indians, I have not a single one of a Cuckoo in my collection other than those of *Eudynamis* which were taken in my presence by small boys, who climbed the trees to get at the Crows' nests for me. Of Cuckoos' eggs taken by Nagas and other tribesmen, I have not a score altogether. As regards the Khasias these hill men were, as I stated, educated men, speaking English, Lepidopterists and Botanists by profession, who had been working for Hume or myself on birds and birds' eggs for many years. They were entirely reliable and, while I was in India, they actually took but few eggs, merely marking them down for me and enabling me to take eggs with my own hands, over a far wider stretch of country than would otherwise have been possible.

My paid collectors have been taxidermists and generally Englishmen who, with one exception, took very few, perhaps half a dozen, Cuckoos' eggs and no others. The exception was a man I employed in Burma and Malaya who took very few eggs—none of Cuckoos—sending them to me with the birds shot off the nest.

Finally, in this respect, I should like to say that though my collection numbers about 6,000 eggs, I must have refused or discarded nearly as many *because the data were not above question*.

I hope this may dispose of any doubts which may arise in the minds of readers as to the reliability of my material.

Next, in regard to the remarks on desertion made on p. 115 of the review. Surely the average field-worker can tell in most cases if a nest is deserted. The eggs are cold, no birds are present, no birds show agitation or resentment at the approach of human beings, while often the nest itself shows that it has been

abandoned and there are many other signs that occur to prove it. On the other hand, in many cases in which the nest may have been *very recently* deserted there is no evidence to this effect and these are not included among the proved desertions.

As regards desertions by Black-headed Shrikes, I do not quite understand the remarks made. I have gone into the facts very fully on p. 17 and again on pp. 21-22, but I lay down no law and come to no definite conclusion, merely making suggestions. I have simply tried in this instance, as in all others, to give and weigh the pros and cons and suggest a conclusion.

Again referring to my suggestion that assimilation is less obvious in Great Britain than elsewhere, he writes "Are we to believe that the Cuckoos settling in Great Britain . . . failed to bring with them the more perfectly adaptive egg they had there." Certainly not; the Cuckoos brought with them the eggs which were more perfectly adapted to their previous hosts but were utterly unadapted to their new.

The reviewer's criticism on what I write about the method by which Cuckoos deposit their eggs in birds' nests is surely not quite fair to me. I fully admitted that Chance had proved beyond all doubt that, what the older writers had often said, many Cuckoos lay in open nests just as other birds do. In domed nests neither Chance, now, nor I believe that the Cuckoo sits in the nest, for Jones and Livesey have shown that normally the eggs are projected into such nests. There are, at the same time, certain nests into which Cuckoos can obviously neither lay their eggs direct nor project them into it. There must, therefore, be a third way and the old theory that Cuckoos lay their eggs on the ground and then place them in the nest by the bill, seems a possible way and may well be the true one, but I have added that this is not proved.

The theory of "gens" of Cuckoos, parasitic on certain fosterers may, I believe, be taken as proved and because the females are promiscuous and because I have shown that each of three females of different gens in one area accepted the attentions of several males residing in that area makes it seem probable that the males do not affect the color of the eggs laid by their progeny.

No index was given, as a fairly full description of the contents is found in the Table of Contents and it was desired to save paper. Obviously, also, an index would have been a mass of duplications and would hardly have helped a reader to find what he wanted.

Fair criticism, such as that made in the review, only stimulates an author to go yet deeper into his subject or to put his views more clearly. Personally, as my only desire is to find out the truth, I welcome this criticism and hope to make use of it.

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EDITOR OF 'THE AUK':—

Mr. Manning has presented us (*Auk*, 1942, pp. 157-175) with additional and valuable additions to our knowledge of the Blue Goose, but his conclusions indicate that he is quite unfamiliar with current subspecific concepts in ornithology. Whatever the Blue Goose is, valid species or dichromatic form of the Snow Goose, it cannot be a subspecies as that taxonomic unit is at present recognized. Personally, I am inclined, at least tentatively, still to regard it as a species until there is more

definite evidence to the contrary. Its status as a dichromatism as yet is based upon little more than a "hunch," the evidence pointing almost equally in either direction. The onus of proof certainly lies with the less usual and until that is produced the only valid verdict is the famous Scotch one of "Not proven," and a more or less suspended judgment.

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EDITOR OF "THE AUK":—

In a recent letter from Dr. T. S. Palmer, exception is taken to the manner of use of the word 'obituary' in the latest 'Ten Year Index to The Auk'. In order to avoid confusion, an explanation may be pertinent.

Upon taking over the compilation of the index, after the death of H. S. Swarth, I found that the word 'obituary' under the name of a deceased person was being used as an adjective, not as a noun, and that citations under this caption did not necessarily refer to a formal obituary notice, but to any reference to the deceased, no matter how brief. As this appeared to me to be a reasonable use of the word, the method was not compared with that used in previous indices, but was continued throughout the remainder of the work. This, of course, resulted in the use of the caption 'obituary' under the names of numerous persons whose formal obituary notices had not yet appeared.

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