

CORRESPONDENCE

SMYTHIES'S 'BIRDS OF BURMA'

EDITOR, THE AUK.—Regarding Smythies's 'Birds of Burma,' on the status of which Mr. S. Dillon Ripley gave interesting information in the last issue of *The Auk* (63: 631, 1946), I would add the following. I received notice of this publication from the American Baptist Mission Press some time in 1941, and immediately ordered a copy. Before I thought my order had time to reach Rangoon, Burma had been overrun by the Japanese, and I expected that I would never hear anything further. Imagine my delighted surprise when, about two months after the fall of Rangoon, I received 'Birds of Burma' through the mail. The volume is now in my personal library.—B. W. CARTWRIGHT, *Chief Naturalist, Ducks Unlimited, Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

VERNACULAR NAMES OF BIRDS

EDITOR OF THE AUK.—The problem of the correct vernacular names of birds is arousing general interest at the moment (see for instance the note by Eisenmann and Poor, 1946). In addition to the general problem which they discuss, it would seem desirable to achieve as much uniformity as possible between British and American "English names," as an increasing number of people are studying birds on both sides of the Atlantic. We suggest the following principles as a basis for discussion.

A. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. English names should not be regarded as rigidly fixed. The English language is always in process of slow change, and this seems a desirable state of affairs. Further, popular usage must be the ultimate criterion, and the deliberate creation of new names which have no popular support should be reduced to a minimum. However, we suggest that periodic bird lists should be published, to help to stabilize names, in the same way that English dictionaries have been issued in the past for the language as a whole. Obviously, rules of priority have no validity with regard to English names.

2. We agree with Eisenmann and Poor that every species should have a comprehensive name used for all races of that species, and which can be applied to any individual without identifying it as to race. This will necessarily involve the deliberate creation of some new names, but these should be as few as possible.

3. We suggest that English names for subspecies should in general be abandoned, because (a) the addition of an English subspecific name in front of the specific name often makes the whole name extremely long and clumsy; (b) most subspecies cannot be identified in the field; (c) they give the amateur a misleadingly definite idea of the subspecies concept; (d) the use of the scientific (Latin) name of the subspecies is sufficient in itself and is without ambiguity. Should an English name be necessary for any purpose, the specific name could be preceded or followed by the breeding area of the race in question, but this practice should be reduced to a minimum.

However, it may be desirable to retain separate subspecific names for extremely distinct subspecies, particularly where this name came into existence before the subspecies concept, e. g. popular usage will probably make for the retention of Pied Wagtail and White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii* and *Motacilla alba alba*) in western Europe, as these very distinctive forms already had English names before they were treated as races of the same species. There are also cases in which it is doubtful whether two forms should be considered as separate species or as subspecies of the same species; e. g. Carrion and Hooded Crows (*Corvus corone* and *Corvus cornix*).

4. Brevity is desirable.