

CORRESPONDENCE

Sir,

The most recent volume of Peters' "Check-list of birds of the world" (Vol. 14, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Mus. Comp. Zool., 1968) contains a major revision of the Icteridae by E. R. Blake. As usual in such lists, no reasons are given for the generic classification presented. Blake (op. cit., p. 138) cites Beecher's (Auk, 68: 411-440, 1951) work on blackbirds, but we find no indication that Blake used Beecher's views in arranging this family. Few considerations concerning the relationships within the nine-primaried oscines are not controversial, and we believe one of these is the view, elaborated upon by Beecher, that blackbirds arose from finchlike ancestors. We know of no taxonomist who considers orioles (*Icterus*), caciques (*Cacicus*) and oropendolas (*Psarocolius*) to be primitive blackbirds. Blake's sequence starts with the oropendolas, the most advanced members of the Icteridae; the advanced caciques and orioles come next, finally followed by the more primitive agelaiine blackbirds. His classification ends in a newly erected, monotypic subfamily, the Dolichonychinae, containing only the finchlike Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*).

We think it generally agreed that a classification should reflect phylogeny. A student or nonornithologist faced with Blake's classification of the Icteridae, far from gaining some idea of the phylogeny and evolution of this family, is confronted with an arrangement containing little information about the relationships of the major groups.

It would seem, too, that the day is long past when one can erect a new (and especially a monotypic) subfamily without so much as a footnote of explanation or indication that a new taxonomic name subject to all rules of zoological nomenclature is being introduced. We are unable to find in the literature a single author who separates the Bobolink from agelaiine blackbirds, even in the 19th century when several subfamilies of icterids were recognized. Elsewhere Short (Amer. Mus. Novitates, No. 2349, pp. 21, 27, 1968) has indicated recently that *Dolichonyx* resembles *Sturnella* in certain ways, and is not far removed from *Agelaius*. Creation of a new subfamily for the Bobolink should have been approached with caution because: (1) *Dolichonyx* has always been placed with the agelaiine blackbirds, and no published study has provided any evidence for its separation from this group of icterids; (2) all new family-level taxa of passerine birds, including new combinations of current taxa or revisions of existing taxa, should be well-documented; and (3) all new family-level taxa of passerine birds, especially monotypic ones, should be well-based and supported by sound comparative studies of all pertinent groups. Placement of the newly erected subfamily after the "Icterinae," rather than before it, appears unjustified in any case, although simply placing it before *Psarocolius* in Blake's classification would hardly make sense either.

We urge authors of classifications and checklists involving rearrangement of taxa to publish: (1) their concepts of various taxonomic categories they may treat; and (2) their reasons for any changes they may make in the existing taxa. Checklists, by their very nature, are not suitable vehicles for the presentation of reasons underlying taxonomic changes; supporting data for all planned taxonomic changes in a checklist should be published elsewhere with clear citation given in the checklist. Further we urge authors and editors of classifications and checklists to indicate clearly all new taxonomic names that may be proposed. These practices certainly would benefit ornithology as well as taxonomy. The failure of taxonomists to treat these matters clearly and rigorously is a major cause of the considerable confusion (Lack, Ibis, 110: 107, 1968) regarding limits of taxa and sequences of avian species in checklists.—LESTER L. SHORT, *The American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York 10024*, and WALTER J. BOCK, *Department of Biological Sciences, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027*.