

CORRESPONDENCE

On Certain 'Modern' Tendencies

EDITOR OF THE CONDOR:

In examining some zoological works published in the early part of the 19th century I have recently noticed several discourses which may be of interest to the readers of THE CONDOR. The numerous protests against the fine discrimination of species and subspecies which have been recently made in various zoological and particularly in ornithological journals are chiefly addressed to those who indulge in what are termed 'modern' tendencies. It seems, however, that neither the protests nor the supposed tendencies are quite sufficiently modern to share the title with storage electricity and wireless telegraphy. As early as 1820, Dewitt Clinton (Letters on the Natural History and internal Resources of the State of New York, pp. 156-157) published a long dissertation upon this subject. The following short extract indicates the 'deplorable' state of affairs then existing.

"This system [the Linnæan], when it came out of the hands of its great architect was recommended by its simplicity, and by its tendency to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. In the progress of time it has become corrupted by the interpolations and sophistications of inferior workmen who have destroyed its beauty, deranged its symmetry, and undermined its strength. The multiplication of terms, the augmentation of synonymes, the creation of new genera, and the fabrication of new species, have overloaded the science with an Egyptian burden of terminology. Philosophy has been transferred from things to words, and the inventor of a new term, of specific or generic difference where none exists, has been absurdly considered as entitled to the honors of an important discovery. A new race of naturalists have started up, who confine their attention solely to verbal description, and who entirely overlook the habitudes and manners of animals, and the uses and characters of other organic beings, and of inorganic matter."

A few years later James E. Dekay, author of the well-known zoology of New York wrote as follows: ^a "New nominal species perplex the student, increase the labours of the critical naturalist, and render the study of natural history tedious and difficult. If it was generally understood that it is more meritorious to extinguish a single nominal species than to establish a dozen new ones, it would effectually check the *present mania* for making new species often on slight foundations. This also leads to an overweening anxiety to secure priority; and hence descriptions are liable to be drawn up in a crude and hasty manner, without reference to the co-ordinate characters."

In 1831, John Godman (Am. Nat. Hist. vol. I, pp. XV-XVI) presented the same ideas as follows: "Beginners of the study of natural history are generally liable to form erroneous conclusions, among which none is more common and prejudicial than that of mistaking the system of classification for the subjects classed, or in other words, the arrangement of the names for the things themselves, nomenclature for natural history. * * * * The mistake above pointed out is continually urging many who would be esteemed naturalists to the formation of new genera and species, founded on trivial, accidental, or imperfectly noted differences between creatures which, to all rational observers, appear the same. This retards science, and misleads individuals as to the character and objects of natural history, which, judged by the conduct of some who are regarded as authorities, would appear to be the science of magnifying trifles and bewildering the understanding. In natural history, as in other departments of human knowledge, none but sciolists are pedants; such persons struggle to impart to their implements the dignity and importance that should belong to the work alone, and, 'in self adoring pride securely mailed,' seek but to glorify themselves, considering the interests of science as nothing when weighed against the gratification of their own vanity."

The application of the foregoing is not far to seek and it would be superfluous to state it at length. Surely the systematists of today prefer the heritage they possess rather than that which would have been theirs if these ultra-conservative counsels had been followed to the letter.

WILFRED H. OSGOOD.

Washington, D. C.

A Protest

EDITOR OF THE CONDOR:

Kindly allow me to make a most emphatic protest against the useless and wasteful record of egg collecting in your journal, vol. IV, pp. 128-131, in a paper entitled "The Holbœll Grebe

^a Address to The New York Lyceum, p. 76.