

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.

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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.

in Montana." The writer of the paper in question is an ornithologist of recognized ability who should stand for the conservation of bird life, but by his own story he worked for two weeks systematically and energetically, and the result was a small amount of the life history of a species that is rarely found breeding within the limits of the United States, and the collecting of probably every egg that was laid by the small colony of five pairs of grebes that had selected Swan Lake for a home. Twenty-eight eggs taken, some of them almost on the point of hatching, and for what,—that they might be measured to see if there was a fraction of an inch difference in the length or breadth of the empty shell, or to note if there was a slight variation in the shade of ground color. Could this not have been done without the sacrifice of twenty-eight young birds, and the consequent distress of the parents?

In my efforts for better bird protection I am often confronted with the statement that much useless and unnecessary collecting is done in the name of science. No one can have a higher appreciation of real scientific work than I accord to it, but the taking of every egg, of a rare breeder, in a small colony, is in no sense scientific, but on the other hand, it is wasteful and reprehensible. One typical set taken in 1902 would have been ample to establish the fact that the Holboell grebe breeds in Montana. It would have been much more scientific to have spent the two weeks in obtaining some insight into the life history of this species; i. e., method of nest building, care of young, food habits, etc. These would have been valuable facts that would interest every other bird student in the country. The twenty-eight empty shells now represent only a devastated bird colony and a story of cruel wrong.

Very truly yours,

WM. DUTCHER.

New York, Jan. 5, 1903.

An Answer

EDITOR OF THE CONDOR:

The limit of temperate collecting has ever been a mooted question, and like many other phases of ornithology, it is likely that the subject will always be open for discussion. As my position on this question has been criticized, I shall try to define my ideas on the ethics of collecting, and to explain the circumstances regarding the particular instance in which I am brought to task.

In a collection of natural history specimens, open to examination and usable by competent persons, the material will conserve to the pleasure and gratification of more people than it will in its native condition of life and surroundings. To support this statement, I bring forward the note in the issue of *Science* for Jan. 23, 1903, page 159, saying that seven hundred thousand people had visited the New York Zoological Park last year, and that the aquarium is visited daily by fully five thousand persons. True, the Park contains living animals, but the principle holds true in collections of whatever nature. For one person who can get out into contact with nature, there are hundreds who must be content with seeing things in cabinets and collections. In the ordinary conditions of life, the number of people who come into actual touch with nature is few indeed; a short walk on Sunday afternoon, a glimpse of some bird by the roadside, or a peep into a nest in some dooryard, is all that such people get out of the vast wealth of environment. The majority of people are pleased with collections that bring the wildwood material to them, for then they see things that otherwise would never come under their observation. Say what we please, there is a place, and a very large place, for natural history collections, even of skins and eggs of birds, as a means of gratification for this large class of persons whom I have mentioned.

It is the mission of lower animal life to minister to the gratification of the higher. This law of nature is annunciated in the Great Book, and has ever been the basis of man's dealings with the inferior creatures. It is my creed that if a set of eggs can minister to the pleasure of any number of observers, there is no question of the collector's right; furthermore, if seven sets of eggs of any one species can serve a purpose in bringing other sets, difficult of access, into one's cabinet by way of legitimate exchange, again the collector's right is beyond moral question.

The purpose of bird protection, as I understand it, is the conservation of bird life for the end I have mentioned, the pleasure and gratification of those who can come into contact with nature in her wildwood home. Of course, there are economical and other arguments for bird protection, but beneath them all lie the idea that the birds are living creatures, having many faculties allied to the human, and that all life is sacred. But let us not sacrifice sense to sentiment, for all lower life is but a part of the great domain of environment, which is to react on the human mind and soul, and develop all our noblest faculties.

If the foregoing be true, the great test of the moral right of the collector is the proper use