

ON KILLING BIRDS

By J. B. TATUM

In a recent article, Phillips (1974) expressed some strong views concerning the killing of birds by North American ornithologists. I should like to take this opportunity to discuss this matter from a different point of view.

Phillips opened his article by writing about "deep ignorance and antiscientific attitudes" concerning collecting. I am one of those who—in spite of 20 years of active scientific research (although not in ornithology)—hold to those very views that Phillips criticizes, and I do not feel that he does great credit to his own arguments or to ornithology as a whole by the use of such intemperate language. He later describes views of Burt (1972) as "demonstrably antiscientific" and states that opposition to what he describes as "harmless acquisition of . . . knowledge" has "no place in scientific journals." Yet most scientists would surely agree that there is always room in scientific journals for all aspects of a problem to be discussed; if anything is out of place in a scientific journal, is it not surely such acrimonious language as engaged in by Phillips?

The episode that apparently started the discussion was the collection of a Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) in the Northwest Territories in 1969, an event that, as judged from correspondence I received from several birdwatchers, had already caused some disquiet in Canada. Phillips answered Burt's query concerning the necessity of collecting this bird by revealing that the bird was found dying and died shortly after being picked up. If this were so, then the authors of the original note (James and Barlow, 1970) were surely remiss in not stating this. Whatever may be the formal dictionary definition of the word "collect," it is normally understood in ornithological circles, unless stated otherwise, to mean "kill by shooting," and perhaps some misunderstanding could have been avoided by James and Barlow in clarifying this point in the original publication.

Yet Phillips went on to describe Burt's "protest" ("question" would be more accurate) as "disturbing and dangerous," a choice of words that can only be described as very serious. He quotes Snyder (1958) as a "distinguished ornithologist" who defended the need for collecting birds. We do not deny the distinction of Snyder in the field of ornithology; at the same time his writings (Snyder, 1958, 1959, 1962) showed that he was long an extreme advocate of the collecting gun and could scarcely be regarded as an unprejudiced and disinterested commentator on the subject. One of his articles (Snyder, 1962) was printed side by side with another (Campbell, 1962) expressing, for comparison, the opposite point

The views expressed here by Professor Tatum represent a rebuttal to Dr. Phillips' earlier article that provided arguments for the scientific collecting of birds. Inasmuch as both sides of the issue have now been given equal space in this journal, *Bird-Banding* will not publish any additional articles on the subject.—Ed.

of view. If Phillips wished to present the case fairly and objectively to a scientific audience it was surely his duty to refer not only to Snyder's article but to other articles opposing Snyder. He might, for example, have referred to another article signed by 25 equally distinguished ornithologists, including Sir Julian Huxley, stating that "to advise the collecting of rare birds for identification purposes when they can be identified adequately by other means must be contrary to any scientific necessity as well as to the principles of conservation" (Allen et al, 1968). Deliberately to select references supporting one point of view and ignoring references that support another may be normal in politics, but it cannot be described as scientific. Nevertheless, even those who refer only to Snyder's 1958 article quoted by Phillips ("the collecting of a pioneer will not thwart population expansion if it is under way any more than Indian massacres stopped the settlement of this continent") may be tempted to question the caliber of the scientific arguments therein.

Referring to the need for the subspecific identification of the Barn Swallow in question, I found Phillips' argument weak, because only one subspecies is recognized in North America (*erythrogaster*) and it is one that is very distinct and recognizable in the field because of its erythro gaster. (The nominate race has a white belly.) Although there is no mention of it in the text of Rand's book "The Birds of North America" (Rand, 1971), the Barn Swallow illustrated therein is a clear example of the nominate European race *rustica*. I do not believe that an ornithologist of the experience of Dr. Phillips would have any serious difficulty in recognizing *erythrogaster* in the field.

More generally the question revolves around the scientific necessity of killing extralimital rarities when they are found outside their normal range. If the occurrence is a truly accidental (nonrepeated) occurrence, then its collection, or even its accurate identification, tells us nothing about either the normal range of the species or the normal avifauna of the area. If, on the other hand, it is the forerunner of a species that is expanding its range, we shall eventually learn this by comparison with observations in adjacent areas and by continued observations in future years. We shall not learn it by killing the first bird.

If the specimen is required for some other purpose, that is another story, and it brings us around to Phillips' question as to "just what anticollectors really want."

I believe that many people would not be so critical of the current habit of shooting locally rare birds if they could be assured that a scientist, in applying for a permit, had been obligated to state in advance to the permit-issuing agency the nature of the planned research project in which he was engaged, why it was essential to examine fresh specimens and what species were required, and if the permit so issued stated which species and how many of each may be killed, and for what purpose.

When an extralimital rarity is discovered and it is shot by someone who is not engaged in any planned research on the species, I

believe the "anticollectors" referred to by Phillips may well have a legitimate cause for complaint, even in the pages of a scientific journal.

It may be true that much interesting research has been carried out on specimens obtained by collectors who had no idea at the time when they shot the birds of the purpose to which they might be put in the future. This is often used as an argument to oppose the suggestion that a permittee should be obliged to state which species he wishes to kill and why. The trouble with that argument is that, if accepted, it implies that a permittee should be free to shoot as much as he likes of what he likes whenever the spirit moves him and whether or not he is engaged in research on the species he is killing. It is a view that is extreme and uncompromising, and as such is unacceptable.

Phillips comments on the situations in Mexico and in England. I am not qualified to comment on Mexican birds other than on the fact that we have in the last few years had undoubted records here in British Columbia of such Mexican species as Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) and Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*) even further from their normal range than some of the Mexican sight records that Phillips doubts.

I have, however, considerable knowledge of the British situation and especially of the "Hastings" records referred to by Phillips, because I have visited that country several times in recent years specifically to discuss questions of record-keeping, the reliability of records, and the evaluation of Palaearctic records there and Nearctic records there.

Phillips stated that we are asked to accept "numerous dubious sight records" from Britain. Yet he does not cite any example to support his contention. Responsibility for the validity of records from the United Kingdom falls on the British Birds Rarities Committee and the Records Committee of the British Ornithologists' Union. Phillips' unsupported characterization of British records as "dubious" might well be taken to be a serious slur on the work of these two bodies, in whom the majority of ornithologists have the very highest confidence.

Worse still, he quotes one privately published article by Harrison (1968) as describing the "Hastings" records as "perfectly valid" and states that they were rejected on "impossible grounds." Here Phillips is at his least convincing, for he gave no reference at all to the series of papers (Nicholson, Ferguson-Lees, and Nelder, 1969; Nelder, 1962; Nicholson and Ferguson-Lees, 1962) stating the reason (deliberate fraud by bird collectors) for which they were rejected, although he must have been aware of the last two of these papers, because they were quoted by Harrison. Nor was the validity of the Hastings specimens "clearly demonstrated" even by Harrison, because it was not even the object of Harrison's book to demonstrate their validity. Rather it was a valiant attempt to clear Bristow's name in connection with the fraud. One wonders, then, on what grounds Phillips finds he can accuse his opponents of "deep ignorance" from his own uncertain position.

As Chairman of the Ornithological Records Committee for southern Vancouver Island, the body responsible for the accuracy of records in this area, and as a university professor who does not believe in the killing of birds for no real purpose, I feel justified in expressing my regret that Phillips chose to refer to "entrenched official stupidity and poor education" and to "ill-informed professors," especially when it is rather easy to call his own knowledge into doubt.

I do not believe Phillips' views represent those of the majority of ornithologists, and I think that many will agree that his article has done little to raise the reputation of ornithology in the eyes of its critics. Those who do collect only in the course of planned research may eventually suffer when their colleagues express such extreme views. It is hoped that ornithologists will remember that, however important *they* might think it is to kill a bird for whatever lofty reason *they* put forward, birds do not *belong* to ornithologists, and they have no prescriptive right to kill them. It is against the law to kill most birds except under special circumstances, and ornithologists must realize, if they are to continue to win the respect of others, that when they are given permits to kill birds an exception is being made to allow them to carry out what would otherwise be an illegal activity. They may continue to kill birds only so long as the rest of society is prepared to tolerate this activity, and such tolerance is unlikely to be fostered by such vituperous phrases expressed by Phillips. Perhaps it *was*, as Phillips stated, fortunate for science that ornithologists killed some grackles in Arizona; what he may not realize is that the vast majority of people do not regard the information obtained as being of the slightest importance whatever. Most people would doubtless grant scientists the privilege of killing some birds for research even if the people were not able to appreciate fully the scientific significance of such research. But when too many incidents occur when birds are being killed for trivial reasons and when extreme views are expressed advocating yet greater freedom for the collectors, public tolerance may well diminish to the serious detriment of ornithology as a whole.

The study and enjoyment of birds has values other than the purely scientific; there are ethical and emoticnal values as well. Indeed, although there are undoubtedly some cases where rare and endangered island avifaunas may well be threatened by over-collecting, in most cases it is readily conceded that scientific collecting has a negligible effect on the total population, and the objections to killing birds are aesthetic and emotional rather than strictly scientific, but nonetheless important for that. Most great scientists are men of humility and would not assert that the needs of science must override other needs. Phillips' diatribe and advocacy of shooting birds is unlikely to win for ornithology the respect and tolerance of the rest of society who, too, have an interest in the welfare of birds.

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