

## Correspondence.

## NOMENCLATURE OF AUSTRALIAN AVIFAUNA.

*To the Editors of "The Emu."*

SIRS,—I was gratified to see Mr. Milligan's letter on this subject, and after this reply it would seem, in the words of the newspaper editor, "This discussion will now cease." For upon the points at issue between Mr. Milligan and myself unanimity of absolute thought may not have been reached, but uniformity of procedure must perforce be accepted.

I sincerely regret that my comments should have seemed to Mr. Milligan to savour of upbraiding; but I wrote rather vigorously, as I hoped thereby to stir up Australian ornithologists out of the lethargy, as regards purely scientific work, into which they appeared to have fallen. As I pointed out, I myself at the time my "Hand-list" was prepared, blindly followed the British Museum authorities in its compilation. Further research convinced me of the fallacy of such action, and I set myself the task of leading the van as regards Australian ornithology, fully convinced of the final success of my cause. The sequel is perhaps as pleasing to Australians as to myself. In the *Nov. Zool.*, vol. xvii., p. 492 (1910), concerning the matter Mr. Milligan firstly comments upon, I wrote:—"It seems only a matter of time before British ornithologists fall in line with the rest of the scientific world." When penning that sentence I fully understood the obstacles and their certain removal, but did not anticipate such an early fulfilment of my prediction as has followed.

Mr. Milligan's letter was received in England on the 11th November, and three days previously the British Ornithologists' Union had unanimously decided that "their adherence to the 12th" (not 13th, as Mr. Milligan has inadvertently written) edition was a "conservatism antagonistic to progress." That is to say, though I cannot claim that I have convinced the British Museum authorities, they have been convinced, and now the whole ornithological world of science is unanimous in the acceptance of the 10th edition of Linné's "Systema Naturæ," and also in the use of trinomials for sub-species, and "Australia must perforce fall into line," for at the same meeting of the British Ornithologists' Union the question of the use of trinomials was also discussed, and here again was uniformity of procedure adopted.

"But, whatever the merits or demerits of either system may be, I, as a member of the Check-list Committee, intend (quite regardless of my personal feelings) to give loyal adherence to the system presently adopted by the national authority on ornithology within the British dominions—namely, the British Museum." Thus writes Mr. Milligan, and this is a most important statement, as it at once enrols him absolutely on my side in every matter of any importance, as at the present time the British Museum ornithologists all follow the 10th edition of Linné's "Systema



Naturæ," employ trinomials to indicate sub-species, and reject the useless generic names adopted by Sharpe in the "Hand-list of Birds." It is thus apparent that my nomenclature (errors excepted) must be approved by Mr. Milligan.

As regards the other points of Mr. Milligan's letter, discussion would scarcely be profitable. The note regarding my rejection of Brisson's generic names shows that Mr. Milligan either does not know anything whatever about Brisson's work or he has very unhappily framed that paragraph. Brisson was the greatest ornithologist of the eighteenth century, and his work is the most used work of reference of that period. Living at the same time as Linné, his knowledge of ornithology far surpassed that of the great systematist, but he did not use a binomial nomenclature, and for this reason his names are inadmissible. It has been decided that Linné's 10th edition, which first proposed a binomial nomenclature for zoology throughout, be accepted as the starting-point of zoological nomenclature, and that only writers who accepted Linné's system be recognized. It should be remembered that there were many writers on various subjects for many years afterwards who refused to have anything to do with Linné's methods, and these have been most conscientiously ignored save, in ornithology, in the case of Brisson. The admission of exceptions breaks down the rigid application of the laws, and therefore I do not admit of any exception whatever. In Brisson's work, 1,386 (according to Allen) species are fully described and named, yet none of Brisson's specific names are used, simply because he was not a binomial writer. To my mind, there is more "positive injustice" in this action, but I accept the laws.

When I quoted Mr. North's words *re* trinomials I added a further sentence, and noted that North was not a user of trinomials. I clearly perceived the innuendo, and would have suggested the reading of a double innuendo regarding hair-splitting in Mr. Milligan's re-quotation had I not in front of me a vigorous defence of hair-splitting by Mr. Milligan himself (*Emu*, vol. iii., p. 245, 1904). If each species had only one sub-species, then would Mr. Milligan's suggestion regarding the nomenclature have been valuable; but, as sometimes sub-species of a species run into the teens, it is impossible. Such ideas have been attempted in other branches, but none has yet been found practicable. However, we have now reached the point of convergence, and henceforth Australian ornithologists will present a united front in that they will accept the International Code in its entirety.

With regard to the comment on p. 130, answer is almost unnecessary except as regards the sentence—"Well may Australians ask—'Why rely on the doubtful drawings of a botanist as against the life-like coloured figures of so great an ornithologist and author as Gould?' 'Bed-rock priority run riot,' people are apt to say." I am quite unable to understand this sentence, as in the paper under notice I can find no instance where I have contrasted



a "doubtful" drawing of a "botanist" with a Gouldian name or figure. The pros and cons of such a comparison are therefore presumptively impossible. Why was such a sentence written?—I am, &c.,

GREGORY M. MATHEWS.

Langley Mount, Watford, England, 16/11/11.

[Mr. Mathews is apparently incorrect, if his surmise be rightly understood. Mr. Milligan is not only familiar with the range and extent of Brisson's work, but is also a sound authority (by virtue of his legal training) on the principles and canons of the "International Rules" and those of the American Check-list Committee. Mr. Milligan's views on the so-called "law of priority" are well known to Australian ornithologists, and most probably his desire in writing as he did was to force from Mr. Mathews the admission that the "rule of priority" was, after all, only a "law of expediency." Mr. Milligan has openly contended that, if the rule were strictly a "rule of priority," all pioneers in zoology, including Brisson and all pre-Linnean authors, would receive acknowledgment. In point of fact, there seems little difference between Mr. Mathews and Mr. Milligan on the subject, for Mr. Mathews, in his first letter (*Emu*, ante, p. 53), states:—"But if the law of priority is applicable to present-day workers, how much more should it be meted to those whose works are all that speak for them? It should be remembered that these early writers, whose names I accept, were quite as enthusiastic and earnest as any of our own time. It cannot be denied that it is due to such writers that their names should be recognized, as it is only just that the merit should be given to those whose right it is. That is all I am doing."

On the question of "hair-splitting," Mr. Mathews is possibly again incorrect. Mr. Milligan has always advocated that, to be thorough, every constant variation, small (but not trivial) as well as great, should be distinguished—obviously a different proposition to "hair-splitting," a method which causes a division without ascertaining a difference.

Lastly, Mr. Mathews is "unable to understand," or has not fathomed the sentence of criticism (*Emu*, ante, p. 130)—"Why rely on the doubtful drawings of a botanist as against the life-like coloured figures of . . . Gould?" In *Novitates Zoologicae*, vol. xviii., Mr. Mathews writes:—"Re-examination of the Watling drawings having indicated errors of identification on the part of Sharpe with regard to some species, which are noted in this paper, I carefully went into the matter again." If two such eminent authorities as Sharpe and Mathews differ about a doubtful drawing, Gould's plates are good enough for Australians. Moreover, a "Recommendation" under Article 28 of "International Rules" reads:—"A specific name accompanied by both description and figure stands in preference to one accompanied only by a diagnosis or only by a figure."—EDS.]



Mathews, Gregory Macalister. 1912. "Correspondence." *The Emu : official organ of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union* 11(3), 218–220.

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