

Some remarks on Re-naming Birds and the Rules of Zoological Nomenclature

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The scientific or technical names of birds constitute at present a burning question in Ornithological circles all over the Empire. Apparently the stumbling block* has been the so-called "bed-rock priority" of name, which has been in vogue for over 160 years without giving finality to numerous names. It was thought that the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature would settle the question in Zoology generally, but it has failed in Ornithology in particular. The Code is disregarded by many workers.

As Linnæus was the father of the simple forms of binomials in biological nomenclature, it was resolved to make his work (*Systema-Naturæ*, 1758) the starting point. That is, no name prior to his work was to be recognised as "official." Then came a nomenclatural movement in 1842-3, when the British Association for the Advancement of Science prepared what was known as "Stricklandian Code." Strange to say, some American nature societies in 1845 adopted the code before the British Association itself did in 1846. W. H. Dall, an American Zoologist, in 1877 prepared a code for the American A.A.S. said to be one of the best essays on the subject ever compiled, yet it was never wholly adopted by the Americans.

The American Ornithologists' Union adopted what promised to be an excellent Code of Rules, but, as this Society was limited to Ornithology, Zoologists in general had no opportunity of bringing forward their difficulties. At last a French Savant, Raphael Blanchard, conceived the idea of an international code, which was worked into shape at subsequent Zoological Congresses—Paris (1889) and Moscow (1892). The German Zoological Society in 1894 adopted a code of its own. When the International Congress next met at Leyden (1895), it was found that British systematists followed the Stricklandian code; the French, the International; the Germans, their own; while Americans had a combination of the Stricklandian and other codes.

At Leyden, a commission was appointed to inquire into the different systems, to suggest unification, and to report at following Congresses. This was done, and was completed at Berne (1904), when a permanent commission was appointed. This commission was, however, only a deliberative and advisory body, with no legislative powers. Neither could the commission, nor the Congress, enforce its rules, and every person is still in a position to follow any code, or prepare his own, if he so desires.

* The author, of course, expresses his own opinion. (Eds.)

So far as some Australian workers are concerned, the chief objection to the International code is its keystone, namely, the so-called "law of priority," which, if taken away, the code falls to pieces like a house of cards. The date of the Linnæan system (1758) is far back in the dim dawn of Ornithology, when the science was in a crude and confused state, and all the types and specimens have long crumbled to dust and decay. Australian Ornithology was born in broader daylight, many years after Linnæus. It has most of its types preserved in some museum or other, and is comparatively free from complications that beset old world workers, who, in striving to right themselves, turn us upside down by altering Australian bird-names that have been commonly used for 60, 70 and even 100 years, and in endeavouring to remove all inconsistencies by the adoption of *one basis*, and thus—

"In seeking to undo
One riddle, and to find the true,
Will knit a hundred others new."

There is no doubt that the great Swedish Botanist created a scientific epoch with the introduction of his binary system of nomenclature. And so surely did the immortal John Gould create a purely Ornithological epoch when he gave to the world the high heap of great folio pictorial works, including seven volumes and supplement of "The Birds of Australia." (Gould sailed from England in May, 1838, for Australia, and returned laden with new and wonderful spoils of this country in 1840.) One has only to turn up the files of the past to understand how Gould was appreciated in his own country. *The Times* (London), on September 3, 1851, published the long and ably written review, reprinted in our last issue.

Australians can therefore hardly forget Gould, while many, especially teachers of popular ornithology, approve of the Gouldian limit of priority of names, *i.e.*, for purely endemic species, but, of course, birds of world-wide habitat would conform to the oldest accepted or authoritative name. We can never hope to kill sentiment. In the Preface to that recent masterpiece, "A Monograph of the Pheasants," by William Beebe, Hy. Fairfield Osborne, President of the New York Zool. Soc., for certain cogent reasons states "the monograph presents a very strong sentimental appeal to all bird lovers!" Sentiment in ornithology is not dead, as some people suppose.

The law of priority is as inflexible as it is inartistic. Take, for instance, the classic generic name of the king of our avifauna, the Emu. Gould calls it *Dromaius*. Bedrock priority says *Dromeicus*. Hear the verdict of the late Professor Alfred Newton, of Cambridge: "The obvious misprint of *Dromeicus* in this author's (Vieillot) work has been foolishly followed by many naturalists, forgetful that he corrected it a few pages farther on to *Dromaius*" (Dictionary of Birds). The arbitrary law of bedrock priority is also mischievous, discredits many

standard works, and, above all, is unnecessary for the study of ornithological science.

Referring to the Emu we read the bird "was first described and figured under the name of the New Holland Cassowary, in Governor Phillip's Voyage to Botany Bay, published in 1789. To this work, Dr. Latham contributed very considerably in the ornithological department, and it is therefore probable that the description of this remarkable bird was furnished by him. The figure, taken from a drawing made on the spot by Lieut. Watts, is extremely defective. In the ensuing year a second figure, taken from the same specimen as the former, but very different in appearance and equally inaccurate, was given in White's Voyage to New South Wales, the Zoological part of which work appears to have been superintended by Dr. Shaw, whose Miscellany likewise contains a copy of the same figure."—(*Gardens and Menagerie of the Zoological Society. Delineated* vol. ii.).

The foregoing appears to be the earliest and very interesting history of the Emu, and well worth being quoted in Cayley's "Birds of Australia." My point, however, is, because Shaw called the Emu a Cassowary ("Southern Cassowary"), according to Gould; see Handbook, vol. ii., p. 200), why should that invalidate the widely known name *Casuarus australis* for the Australian Cassowary? In the realm of common sense the thing is preposterous, for there can possibly arise no confusion in using the prior name *australis*, for the Australian species or subspecies as the case may be. The suggested alteration to the name *johnsoni* tends to the "chaos of words" from which the "Rules" are intended to rescue science.

"No changes should rest on uncertainties" (W. H. Dall). A good maxim. Who was Bosc? It is said he described a live Quail from anywhere. At least Mr. Matthews had to declare its locality 122 years afterwards. There is also the uncertainty as to its species. But why hanker after an absolutely obsolete name to resuscitate which is not an iota of value to science, especially when we have had John Gould's immortal plates and names in vogue for nearly 80 years!

Then there is the "Priority" puzzle about our Snipe, under the singularly alliterative title "Scopoli or Scopolax." "Let sleeping dogs lie." Because in ancient times Sanderlings, Snipes, and Sandpipers were, as you may well suppose, much mixed, not only in companies, but also in names, *australis* for *Gallinago* cannot stand! Who said so? Not G. R. Gray, because in all his "official" editions ("official" because issued under the authority of that National Institution, the British Museum), he places *harwickii* as a synonym to *australis*; likewise do the later British Museum's "Catalogues of Birds," as well as does Henry Seebohm—that great Plover authority. Did Gray declare the type of *hardwickii* by "original designation"? There was no such term in his day. The expressions "Type by original designation," "Type by absolute tautonymy," etc., apply, I take it, subsequent

to the making of the "National Rules," and should not be made retrospective for a century.

Can anything be more foolish than an attempt to change the specific name of the familiar Kookaburra (Laughing Jackass), *gigas*, to *novæ guineæ*? *Gigas* has obtained for 138 years, while *novæ guineæ*, besides being geographically erroneous, has not, until recently, been used authoritatively, or, as a matter of fact, by ornithologists at all.

Now, we come to another interesting point—interesting because of an attempt to stand down the strictly prior and well known name *superba* for the Lyre-Bird. It is the devotees of the law of priority who make the rule to overreach itself. They take the letter (technicalities) for the law (actual).

The history of naming the Lyre-Bird is a case in point. Major-General Davies described the wonderful new bird before the august Linnæan Society of London, 4th Nov., 1800, adding a postscript to the description, June, 1801, in which year it was probably published. That year (1801) Dr. Latham named the Lyre-Bird *novæ-hollandiæ* in a supplement of his "Index." For convenience sake, the Linnæan Society apparently bound its three years' "Proceedings" in one cover, under date 1802. Because it did so, is General Davies to lose priority in actual point of time? Moreover, the plate of the *Menura* which accompanied his paper is inscribed "F. Davies, del. 1799"—two years before the date of Latham's Supplement. The common usage of the name *superba* for the Lyre-Bird is simply a "historical fact." It is futile to argue against a fact. No academical decree or technicality can alter a fact.

Again touching the two fine and favorite parrots—the Red-wing and the King. In 1865 Gould in his "Handbook" (vol. ii., p. 37), wrote:—"The birds for which I propose the generic appellation *Ptistes* are, in my opinion, sufficiently different in form and colouring to warrant their being separated from *Aprosmictus* and formed into a new genus." There you have a definite starting place—a priority point; yet some nomenclaturers would transpose one name and bestow the new name of *Alisterus* on the other. To alter the long standing and ornithologically correct names of two common parrots, is, to borrow the expression of a learned judge—"as a matter of common sense, it has no justification."

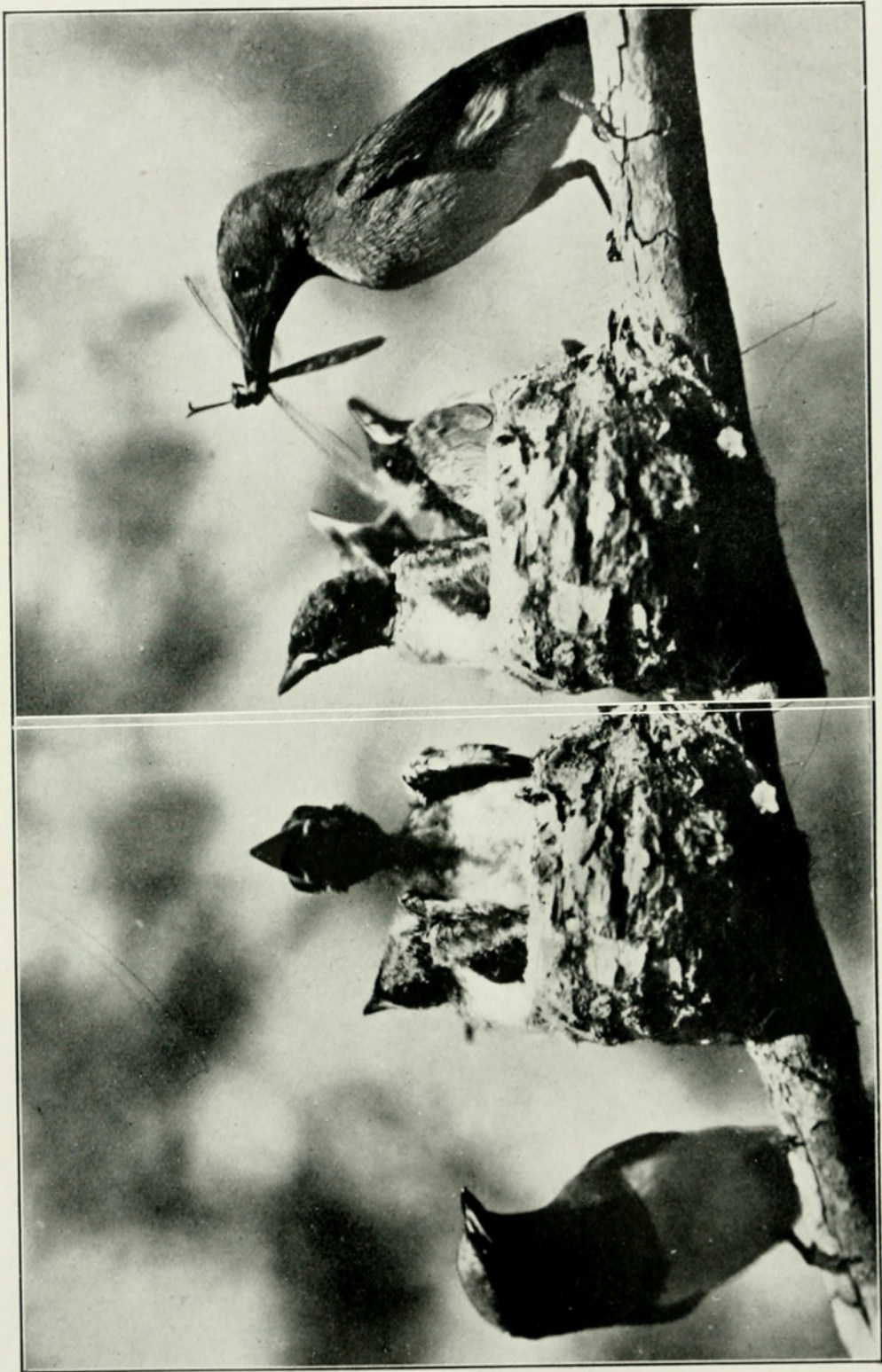
What is the remedy for a permanent ornithological nomenclature? As easy as it is final. It has been truly stated that "the terrible war has broken down all tradition, all precedent, all regard to settled practice." In any case the bottom has been knocked out of the "International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature" for generations to come, if not for all time. Dr. Wardwell Stiles—its talented secretary—I think, will tell you that. Then let us start afresh with the English-speaking peoples' committee for the new *Systema Avium*, and declare and fix authoritatively all bird-names, dropping, or at least modifying, the inflexible law of "bed-rock priority."

I have previously mentioned that bed-rock priority in nomenclature was the key-stone of the International Code. Take away the keystone and the code collapses. Moreover, nomenclature is not a science, or even a quasi-science; therefore the keystone is already insecure. And because you are up against an eternal truism. The Lord made no cast iron law of priority when He said, "Many that are first shall be last and the last first." "And the scripture cannot be broken." What is right in a psychological sense is also correct in temporal affairs.

In the great war that has just been won by the Allies, were appointments to the higher army commands made by selection or by seniority—*absolute seniority*? You may answer that question to yourselves. Similarly in every walk of life. In a great commercial concern it is not always the senior employee who sits in the manager's chair.

Then, regarding the *authority* of the International Commission or its rules, are they not strictly *ultra vires*, as the legal phrase goes? Can rules, or regulations made so recently as 1904—only 17 years ago—act retrospectively for over 100 years, as in some of the cases I have cited? (I venture to suppose that the thing is unheard of in any legislative measure.) Or yet, take another example—Gould in his early enthusiasm named the beautiful and songful little yellow Gerygone, *olivacea*, from an immature skin he received in England. When he came to Australia, a huge undertaking in those days, he found that the mature bird was the one which he had well named *albogularis* on account of its white throat, and sunk his other name *olivacea* as a synonym. Can any person or body of persons legislate 66 years subsequently and say that Gould committed an error; that he should have used his first name? Nonsense, and so much the worse for the International rules if they act so illogically. Moreover, it is contrary to common-sense to take, as the basis of nomenclature, a description, or name which the author himself had openly condemned and had corrected, and one which had no priority of publication.

When Professor Blanchard first drew up his celebrated Code, probably he had not the slightest idea how far-reaching and upsetting would be some of its effects, especially with regard to the priority business. He had no doubt in his mind that in many countries of Europe each had a different name for the same species, and it was wise to suggest that the first, or oldest name, if correct, should prevail. But here, in the island Continent of Australia we have had in common use for many species, one out-standing or only name, to alter which, except for ornithological error, tends to confusion and to defame standard works of reference. Because the insect-world alone has had four millions species (almost equal to one for every soul in the Commonwealth), or because in Medical Zoology (often a matter of life or death) a certain species has forty or more synonymous names in use, some exacting rule, such as bed-rock names is



Nest, young and adults of the Leaden Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*)

Female with adult antlion

Male near nest

Photos. by E. M. Cornwall, R.A.O.U., Mackay, Queensland.

necessary. However, that is no reason why the most popular of sciences—ornithology—with its comparatively limited number of species should be so treated and set back.

The wording of some of the rules might with advantage be amended. Examples—(1) Art. 21. "The author of a scientific name is that person who first publishes the name in connection with an *indication*, or definition, or a description." To let bed-rock priority rest on a mere "indication" has been the cause of much evil in nomenclature. Therefore the words "an indication" should be expunged from the rule. It seems hardly just that in "an indication" such as "little lighter above," or "much darker below (as the case may be) than so-and-so" with a trinomial, the name should take precedence for all time. The description should be scientific, not slovenly.

(2) Art. 32. "A generic, or a specific, name once published cannot be rejected (even by its author) because of inappropriateness." Some up-to-date authors read this rule in a negative sense and continue to create inappropriate names. For instance, *Harriwhitea*—a proposed new generic name for the Northern or Albert Lyre-Bird.

Regarding three similar names—*Alisterus*, *Alisteranus*, and *Alisterornis*—coined by Mr. Mathews for separate Australian genera, and in referring to them I do not intend to disparage that author's work, but merely mention them to stress what may be permitted under the so-called and supposed high authority of "The International Code of Zoological Nomenclature" which we are led to believe is "to rescue science from becoming a mere chaos of words."

I am not the only voice "crying in the wilderness." In England, Mr. Robert Gurney, M.A., F.Z.S., in an ably written address, "Modern Zoological Nomenclature" (Trans. Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society, 1918) has drawn attention to the unworkableness of the International Code. Mr. Gurney's paper should be read in its entirety.

Camera Craft

The Leaden Flycatcher.—I am sending some nesting pictures of the Leaden-coloured Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*). The male gave me no trouble, and seemed to trust me perfectly. He came and took up the post as I was focusing on the nest only two feet from the nest, and remained there all the time I was at work. In fact, I had to ask him to leave so as to give me a chance at his mate. The hen bird was quite a different proposition, and I had to wait several days before she gave me my opportunity. The rate of growth of these little chaps is truly remarkable. In one picture, the male is brooding the young birds, which were about two or three days old, and was able to sit right into the nest. Only five days later he was fairly



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