

noticed the statement that the author had no opportunity for proof-reading his paper he would scarcely, I think, have committed so grave an offence against the canons of just criticism, with which he may be presumed to be fairly well acquainted, as to employ the severe terms he does without an accompanying statement that the author's absence during the passage of his report through the press removes all blame from his shoulders. As I am compelled to believe he must have overlooked this note at the head of the errata slip, printed though it is in type of no inconspicuous size, it may chance that others may do so also; and I therefore take occasion to state—mainly for the benefit of those who may see Dr. Coues's strictures without having access to the report itself and the accompanying errata slip—that, while accepting full responsibility for all statements of fact contained in the paper, I cannot consent to be held accountable for errors of omission and commission in the way of proof-reading and typographical execution. My absence from Washington while this report was in press is regretted by no one so much as myself, but was unavoidable.

Very respectfully,

E. W. NELSON.

Tucson, Arizona.

[It was certainly not our intention to hold Mr. Nelson responsible for the typographical errors of his report; for we did notice his statement disclaiming responsibility therefor, and intended the general tenor of our 'strictures' to imply that the typographical eccentricities were no fault of his, although we failed to formally so state.—E. C.]

A Plea for the Metric System in Ornithology.

TO THE EDITORS OF THE AUK:

Dear Sirs: It seems to me extremely unfortunate that most of our ornithological writers persist in the employment of the confusing and irrational system of inches and hundredths, or, still worse, inches and lines, in the measurement of birds and their eggs.

The metric system is so simple, and its advantages so numerous, that it has already become the acknowledged standard in all departments of science. Certainly none will gainsay that its universal adoption is inevitable sooner or later. Then why defer the hour and thereby increase the already too great number of measurements that must eventually be reduced to the metric system? The labor of converting a series of measurements from one scale to another is not small, and life is too short for busy men to be obliged thus needlessly to waste valuable time.

If we were the only people who have occasion to measure birds the case would resolve itself into one of the relative convenience of the two systems (and even then the choice could but fall to the metric); but as a matter of fact there are ornithologists in all parts of the world, and the comparison of published measurements has become an every day neces-

sity. "But the arithmetical disadvantage," in the language of the eminent President of Columbia College, Professor Barnard, "is by no means the whole, or even the greater part, of the evil which this state of things produces. A much more grave consideration is the fact that it interposes an effectual bar to the intelligent interchange of thought. It renders it impossible for an American to converse understandingly with an Austrian on any subject involving quantities of any description. It makes it impossible for an American to derive instruction from an Austrian book or magazine or journal where quantities are mentioned; or an Austrian from an American. This is an enormous evil, and as it exists not in this quarter only, but everywhere, the world has crying need of its removal."*

In times when communication between nations was of rare occurrence, incommensurability of unit bases was not dreaded as at present. But imagine the impediments to commerce that must have arisen from this source in Europe during the early part of the present century. The unit of measure known as the foot was 11.62 inches in Rome; 13.68 in Lombardy; 23.22 in Lucca; 9.76 in Avignon; 10.57 in Rouen; 14.05 in Bordeaux; 11.33 in Rostock; 19.21 in Geneva; 9.25 in Wesel; 10.89 in Bavaria; 13.12 in Carlsruhe; 10.86 in Brussels; 11.28 in Liège, etc. Is it to be wondered at, then, that these people, to again use the words of President Barnard, "in looking about for a common system, and finding the metric system to be an existing system, and a good system, and, above all, an available system, and the only one available for the purpose, . . . should have seized upon it, and legalized it, and made it permanent, without too anxiously concerning themselves with the questions whether the metre would not have been better if it had been a little longer or a little shorter, or if it had represented something different from what it does represent," etc. "Men of science have adopted this system, not only because of their approval of its principles, but because it is a labor-saving machine of immense capabilities."

Owing to the vast size of our own country we did not so soon feel the need of this reform, but our commercial relations with other powers are so extensive that our Government, eighteen years ago, legalized by act of Congress the use of the metric system in business transactions. It has been formally adopted by nearly all civilized nations, and has proved a far greater boon than even its most earnest advocates were led to expect.

A glance at the scientific journals of the day shows that this system is in vogue in all parts of the world, not only among physicists and chemists, but also among naturalists. Even in the United States it is largely employed by mammalogists, osteologists, palæontologists, herpetologists, and ichthyologists; by those engaged in the study of our invertebrates, and by botanists. Why then should American ornithologists, who desire and profess to keep abreast of the progress of knowledge in their department, permit themselves to postpone the acceptance of this most useful addition to their armamentarium by the continued employment of a scale of linear

* The Metric System of Weights and Measures. By F. A. P. Barnard, S. T. D., LL. D. New York, 1872, pp. 28-29.

measure that is incommensurable with others, incongruous in itself, and fast becoming obsolete?

The founding of the American Ornithologists' Union marks the commencement of a new era in American Ornithology. It is about to establish a stable nomenclature, based upon sound principles, and carried out with painstaking and impartial thoroughness. Let it also advocate, and let its organ 'The Auk,' demonstrate, that American ornithologists abandon the barbarous scale of their forefathers and join the men of science of all nations in adhering to a system of weights and measures that is uniform throughout the world, and whose simplicity and convenience are not among the least of its recommendations.

C. HART MERRIAM, M. D.

Locust Grove, N. Y.

[Our correspondent's presentation of the advantages of the metric system and its claims for adoption is not only timely but so fully covers the ground that little need be added in its further advocacy. To the greater part of the present generation of American ornithologists the proposed change will be attended with more or less inconvenience, but should nevertheless be promptly assented to and heartily adopted, in the interest not only of science, but above all for the convenience of our immediate successors. The metric system is presented in our school text-books, and quite generally taught in our public schools; it is, as Dr. Merriam states, the system already most generally employed in science the world over, being used exclusively by the leading scientific writers in all departments of science, including even zoölogy. To make the transition period as brief as may be, it is desirable that the change be promptly and generally made; and to this end we would urge all contributors to the pages of 'The Auk' to give their measurements in the metric system.—EDS.]

NOTES AND NEWS.

HARD upon the letter in which Professor Hermann Schlegel honored the A. O. U. by accepting Foreign Membership of this Association—a letter written *alieno manu*, in consequence of fading eyesight—comes to us the sad news of his death, removing one of the world's great ornithologists. Professor Schlegel died on the 17th of January at the age of 79, having been for some twenty-five years the Director of the Royal Museum at Leyden, and for half a century one of the most active and prominent of European workers in science. He is probably best known in this country by the numerous volumes entitled 'Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle des Pays-Bas,' in which are set forth the great riches of the Leyden collection, in the direction of which he succeeded Temminck on the death of the latter in 1858.



Merriam, C. Hart. 1884. "A Plea for the Metric System in Ornithology." *The Auk* 1, 203–205. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4067424>.

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