



# LETTERS

## THE PLUMAGE OF THE CROSSBILL.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—In the recent article (pp. 173-4) on the plumages of Crossbill, Mr. Witherby alludes to my paper on the "Plumage of the Male Crossbill" (*Ibis*, 1915, pp. 662-9) and *presumes* that the yellow or green yellow adult males examined by me were *certainly wild birds*. I should have thought that anyone who had carefully read my paper could not fail to gather, since I made a special point of the *abnormality of the plumage of captive birds*, that the plumages as detailed by me *were* based upon wild birds. It is new to me to find one expected to say that one's accounts of plumages are based on *wild* birds (and even Mr. Witherby does not appear to think it necessary to say so except in the case of the adult Crossbill), for any conclusions based on birds in captivity are well known to be valueless. I should have thought, moreover, that evidence of subspecific rank could not be admitted on captive birds, and therefore I am very surprised to find that one race (*L. c. hispana*) was founded on five birds (including the type), all of which had been in captivity! (Hartert, *Vög. p. Fauna*, p. 119).

GROVE HOUSE, LOWESTOFT.

CLAUD B. TICEHURST.

[A yellowish plumage being normal in male Crossbills after moulting in captivity and the same plumage in wild adult males being apparently quite abnormal, it did not seem to me unreasonable to inquire if Dr. Ticehurst had made certain that the yellowish adult males he had examined had not been in captivity.

Although many writers on plumages have made use of captive birds as a basis for their conclusions (and unfortunately still do so), I did not for a moment suppose that Dr. Ticehurst had knowingly done so, but skins of birds which have been in captivity often find their way into collections and this fact is not always clearly indicated on the label.—H.F.W.]

## SUPPOSED EAGLE-OWL IN AYRSHIRE.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—Whilst out on a high moor here yesterday with four other guns for a final day at the Grouse, we were all surprised to see an enormous Owl coming across the moor low towards the butts, which were well hidden. It was snowing at the time and the wind was blowing from the north. From where I was in a butt at the one side of a small loch, the bird appeared to me to be the size of a Heron and not a whit smaller—dark, and flying laboriously at the edge of the loch—about sixty yards distant from me, but quite close to the next butt.

After the drive I asked the next "gun" to me if he had noticed the bird, and he replied that it flew quite close to him and settled for a second or so within easy shot, but that he never shot Owls on principle and so did not fire. He was sure it was an Owl and a very large one indeed. The next "gun," who has a good knowledge of all birds, was preparing to fire at it, declaring it to be as big as a Heron, there being no comparison between it and a Tawny Owl, with which bird he was familiar.

The other "gun" and the old keeper who occupied the two outer butts following, both described the bird as an Owl and the size of a Black-backed Gull, each saying, like the rest of us, that in the distance it was like a Heron in size and slow flap of wings. It seems a pity that the bird was not obtained, as I have no doubt it was an Eagle-Owl (*Bubo bubo*).

The weather has been most severe, north-easterly gales and heavy frost for the past month. When the bird alighted it was much smaller in appearance, as the "guns" remarked who were near, but when on the wing it seemed enormous.

E. RICHMOND PATON.

HARESHAWMUIR, BY KILMARNOCK, *December 5th*, 1915.

#### THE GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE IN HEREFORDSHIRE.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—May I point out that this bird (see p. 186) was *not* shot on my estate, but was found badly wounded by my gamekeeper just within one of the boundary lines. A neighbour's keeper must have been the guilty individual, for I am the last person to permit or encourage the slaughter of rare birds, and my gamekeeper is very well aware of the fact. He kept the eagle alive for two days, when it succumbed to its injuries. The bird was an *adult* female.

HUBERT D. ASTLEY.

BRINSOP COURT, HEREFORD, *December 2nd*, 1915.