

LETTERS

“SCIENCE AND THE BIRD-WATCHER”

SIRS,—As a reader of *British Birds* for many years, may I be allowed to offer my humble opinion on the views expressed so forcibly by Messrs. G. L. Scott and D. K. Ballance in the September number (*antea*, pp. 398-399).

Surely the whole matter centres around the question whether there are too many “bird-watchers” as opposed to those who are really amateur ornithologists in the truest sense of that term, and who are always ready to take part in national enquiries and field studies, rather than to spend their time merely watching for as many different species as possible.

Judging from some “bird-watchers” known to me, the sole aim of so many to-day is to see how many different species and rarities they can observe, rather than to occupy their time in studying the habits and behaviour of the creatures they so assiduously hunt. This “collecting” mania is almost as virulent as was the egg and skin collecting of a past age.

British Birds strikes a happy medium, and lives up to its reputation established over fifty years, as a journal primarily concerned with birds on the British list in a manner that does justice to its editors.

If “bird-watchers” want their ornithology popularized, there are plenty of articles in newspapers and other periodicals, but let *British Birds* remain what it is and always has been, journal of unimpeachable scientific value to all ornithologists, both professional and amateur.

CHAS. H. COOKE

SIRS,—As another “bird-watcher”, I write to say how completely I agree with Messrs. Scott and Ballance’s letter in your September issue.

We now have in this country a very large number of people interested in birds, and the hobby is attracting more and more followers as a result of the publicity given to it by television, radio programmes and otherwise; yet there is no journal which really caters for the ‘bird-watcher’.

British Birds differs but little from *Bird Study* in its predominantly scientific approach. Why cannot that aspect of bird-watching—ornithology if you like to call it that—be kept the province of *Bird Study*, the journal of what is essentially a scientific body? *British Birds* could then publish material of real interest to the “bird-watcher”.

Articles on field-identification and behaviour as opposed, for example, to wing-formulae and parasites (which few of us have the opportunity to study except at observatories) would I am sure prove immensely popular. Then I would suggest that the more interesting articles appearing in the journals of local societies could be published by *British Birds*.

Finally, if it be doubted that the views expressed here are those held generally, let *British Birds* send out a questionnaire with its next issue inviting the views of its readers on the above matters. This course was successfully adopted recently by the journal of the professional society to which I belong.

D. BICKNELL

SIRS,—In company, no doubt, with many other bird-watchers I feel that I must comment on the extraordinary letter from Messrs. Scott and Ballance in your September issue.

It seems to me that there are three main types of bird-watcher:—

- (1) The professional zoologist.
- (2) The amateur watcher who wishes to make valuable use of his observations and so may be said to have a "scientific" approach.
- (3) The bird-watcher as defined by Messrs. Scott and Ballance, whose main delight is watching birds at all times and in all places, without wanting to do any more about it.

Now, neither I nor my ornithological friends have found any attempt at conversion from one type to another. The zoologist and the scientific amateur may, and often do, deplore the wasted opportunities of the plain bird-watcher, but to suggest that such activities are decried surely points only to inferiority complexes on the part of your correspondents. No type of bird-watching is better than another; no-one wishes to interfere with another's pleasure; birds are there (*inter alia*) to be enjoyed by us all.

The policy of your magazine caters for all tastes. One may perhaps question the value of some of the information so painstakingly gathered and recorded, but this is merely criticism of the intrinsic worth of some papers, not of the policy of publishing them.

No, gentlemen, pray continue to uphold a high standard: if your correspondents find the published matter incomprehensible, is this not a question of their own standards of comprehension rather than that of the standard of the papers concerned? Chatty notes and discursive articles lead to shoddy thinking. There is meat for all bird-watchers, amateur or professional, in your magazine: long may it continue!

MICHAEL RAYNER

SIRS,—I do not agree at all with Messrs. Scott and Ballance. Mr. A. W. Boyd's reply (*antea*, pp. 399-400) seems to hit the nail right on the head. The matter you publish is full of interest and must be of the greatest help to all those who are anxious to get down to the "why and wherefore" of bird life. The paper entitled "The 'invasion' type of bird migration", published in the August issue (*antea*, pp. 314-343), was, I thought, particularly interesting and the only suggestion I would venture to make is that the ecological aspect of ornithology might perhaps receive rather more emphasis in *British Birds*. Anyway, all good wishes to "B.B." and many thanks for much enjoyable reading.

W. N. A. THOMPSON

[The above are typical of the many comments received on this subject. Space permitting, it is hoped to publish a further small selection in our next issue. For what it is worth, those in favour of Mr. Boyd's reply outnumber the supporters of Messrs. Scott

and Ballance by about 6 to 1, but we do not wish this fact to be taken as a signal that there should be a further flood of correspondence: we appreciate that criticism of the type brought forward by Messrs. Scott and Ballance is always more likely to stimulate those who disagree than those who feel that their point has already been made. We are always glad to receive constructive comments, however, and we are considering a number of the suggestions that have been made.—Eds.]