

British Birds

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Editorial

IT IS NOW NINE YEARS since the early loss of Bernard Tucker, so soon after he had succeeded Harry Witherby in the editorship, faced *British Birds* with the most severe crisis of its existence. The editorial continuity, so vital for the maintenance of the character and standards of the journal, had almost been broken. At the same time rising costs and adverse conditions for all periodicals had to be weathered, while the task of keeping abreast of the mounting flood of ornithological output was threatening to become impossible.

In response to this daunting challenge the newly re-formed editorial team rallied to the standards and traditions which Harry Witherby had laid down, but sought to harmonise them with the vigorous new forces prominent in post-war ornithology. A close working understanding was reached with the British Ornithologists' Union regarding additions to the British List, and with editors of county reports concerning the criteria for accepting sight records of rarities. The policy of publishing bird photographs of exceptional subject interest and high technical standard was further developed under the talented guidance of George Yeates. Prominence was given to the work of bird observatories, whose flourishing condition owed much to one of the new members of the editorial board, W. B. Alexander. Stimulated by the robust common sense of Arnold Boyd, the team put up a pretty successful resistance against the encroachment of jargon and unnecessary technicalities. Reviving interest in European ornithology (arising in no small part from *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, of which P. A. D. Hollom was a joint author) led to the enlistment of a growing band of eminent Continental contributors from Scandinavia round to Spain.

The editorial team of the "fifties", however, despite its not inconsiderable achievements, must frankly recognise that it has not proved strong enough to do all that was required of it. Even though I. J. Ferguson-Lees was enabled to retire from teaching and devote his

whole time to the executive editorship, the scale and multiplicity of editorial tasks and correspondence has far outrun and constantly tended to swamp the combined capacities of the team. Its age composition and geographical dispersion have to a serious extent weakened the board by preventing it from meeting as a whole. Inability to raise circulation correspondingly with increasing demands from many quarters for unpaid services and advice has proved a chronic handicap. Successive printing trade difficulties have added severely to the strain, and have contributed their quota to recurrent lateness in publication.

The time has therefore come for a radical overhaul, and with the opening of 1960 a series of important changes are coming into effect. Very fortunately a further rise in subscription rates is not one of these: despite the costly new settlement in the industry, the necessity for passing on higher production costs to readers has been averted. Subscribers will continue to receive the twelve monthly issues plus the additional annual Ringing Number for £2 a year, including postage and dispatch. The only change in this direction will be that a simplified brief index will be included with the December issue, as in pre-war years, while the fully detailed index will in future be obtainable separately at a price of 5s. annually.

Hitherto *British Birds* has been printed for the publishers, H. F. & G. Witherby Ltd., by the associated printing firm Witherby & Co., even though this has sometimes meant latterly that for technical reasons part of the setting might have to be done in London and the rest in Watford. The publishers have now proposed, and the editors have agreed, that it would be more convenient to have all the printing done closer to the executive editor's office and, accordingly, *British Birds* is now being wholly produced in Bedford by Diemer & Reynolds Ltd. We cannot let this occasion pass without a tribute to the loyal and skilled service rendered over half-a-century by Witherby & Co. as printers. The exceptionally high and dependable standard of the photographic plates has often been praised in many countries, and is indeed held by some well-informed judges to be the highest in any ornithological journal in the world. Perhaps less widely appreciated, but in its way no less remarkable, has been the typographical skill demonstrated in such peculiarly exacting achievements as the setting of the annual Ringing Report. There seems no room for doubt that the new partnership, which we welcome, will bring increased convenience, closer contact and improved speed of production which is all-important for giving better service to our readers. In embarking on it we express our thanks and appreciation to Witherby & Co.

One of the immediate effects of the change is to enable certain improvements, or so we hope they will be judged, to be carried out in

the form of the journal, as we propose in future to call it, the word "magazine" no longer being generally understood as describing this type of periodical. Readers will notice that the new type allows significantly more separation between the lines to make for easier reading, and other minor changes, without radically departing from tradition, are designed to keep it abreast of modern practice: for example, instead of being LIII this new volume is 53. The new layout of the plates, too, allows bigger and more attractive reproductions.

At the same time, a series of new measures have been adopted to enable the editors to cope with the ever-increasing mass and complexity of ornithological material. The first of these reinforcements, already described in the August 1959 issue (*Brit. Birds*, 52: 240-244) is the new Rarity Records Committee. Unfortunately we have lost the services of one of the original ten members, H. P. Medhurst, who has now gone abroad. His advice will be missed, but he is to be succeeded by I. C. T. Nisbet—so that the Committee now consists of P. A. D. Hollom, H. G. Alexander, D. D. Harber, A. Hazelwood, I. J. Ferguson-Lees, Prof. M. F. M. Meiklejohn, Dr. I. C. T. Nisbet, Major R. F. Ruttledge and Kenneth Williamson, with G. A. Pyman as honorary secretary and compiler of the annual national rare birds report. No one who has not experienced the impact of the vastly increased sight records of rarities can appreciate the strain under which the well-tried system which was good enough until the last few years has entirely broken down. The new one will, we are confident, not merely equal but in several ways easily surpass the best standards of treatment of such records attained with the much less copious flow of the past, and will enable the arrears of publication which have recently been so distressing to be eliminated.

There are, however, many important notes which do not relate to rarities, and these also present increasing editorial difficulties with the growing body of relevant literature on each specialised aspect of ornithology, and the more advanced and sophisticated methods and topics of observation now current. Accordingly, to assist over this important and widely read department of the journal, a corresponding team has been created—consisting of P. A. D. Hollom, Stanley Cramp, I. J. Ferguson-Lees, Derek Goodwin, Dr. I. C. T. Nisbet and Dr. N. Tinbergen. The editors trust that by this means the number and value of the notes will be increased.

Among other objects, both these developments are designed to carry a long step further the policy of spreading the editorial duties and delegating responsibility to a wider and predominantly younger group representative of different parts of the country and different approaches and lines of study, including amateur and professional ornithologists together. Even if there were still a Harry Witherby, one-man direction

is no longer a possible basis for coping with modern ornithological output, and the best alternative is to bring together and rely on a balanced team of varied ages and outlooks, from which the necessary talent and experience to make good losses and to meet emergencies and new burdens can be found as they are required.

The logic of this approach calls for readiness among the members of the editorial board to bring in new blood and give fresh opportunities for acquiring experience, without waiting until some tragedy compels it. Accepting this situation, and the importance of enabling the responsible board to meet freely and frequently as a body in future, a number of changes in its composition take effect from the New Year. E. M. Nicholson, who assumed the responsibility of senior editor at short notice in order to cope with the emergency resulting from the death of Bernard Tucker, now hands over to P. A. D. Hollom, in effect changing places with him and remaining on the editorial board as an ordinary member. A new status of honorary editor is created in recognition of the position of those editors who are now prevented by age or infirmity from travelling, and cannot therefore participate in the active duties of the editorial board, namely Dr. N. F. Ticehurst, whose fiftieth year of editorial association we commemorated in last June's issue, and W. B. Alexander. It would be impossible to permit that their much valued connection with *British Birds* should be broken, and they will continue to be consulted from time to time, while being relieved of responsibility for the day-to-day editorial tasks. At the same time George Yeates, owing to his business commitments, has regretfully asked to be relieved of his duties as photographic editor, and, with the warm thanks of his colleagues for his unfailing helpfulness, is succeeded by Eric Hosking who needs no introduction and has indeed long been a principal contributor to the pictorial pages. The need for a new editor readily available for consultation on the spot and able to take responsibility for a block of editorial work has long been felt and will be met by the appointment to the editorial board of Stanley Cramp, chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the British Trust for Ornithology and well known for his bird census and other studies.

It seems unnecessary to describe here other consequential or domestic changes of a secondary nature. The steps now taken have been carefully thought out in order to give better service to our subscribers and to ornithology. We hope they will enjoy the support of our readers and contributors.

E. M. N.