

BRITISH BIRDS

Editorial

Advances in field identification

Ever since B. W. Tucker wrote the field characters sections of *The Handbook* 35 years and more ago, Britain has led the ornithological world in developing both the criteria and the disciplines of field identification. We have not by any means held a complete monopoly: for example, America through Roger Tory Peterson taught us a considerable lesson in visual presentation in the 1950's, and recently Sweden through Lars Svensson, writing primarily for ringers, has stolen a bit of a march in the concise presentation of essential characters. It seems, however, that in terms of sheer effort we in Britain still try the hardest to break the barriers surrounding difficult species or groups. In this respect, the work of several contributors to this journal has been outstanding. Furthermore, the increasing experience and, thus, skill of observers are more and more evident throughout Britain, and nowhere more so than in the files of the Rarities Committee. It therefore seems strange that there are signs of a backlash in observers' opinions on the practicability of further refinements in diagnosis, and of doubt that some of the ground already gained will be held. It is also worrying that the number of observers publishing identification studies has noticeably contracted, while controversies in the field over both bird and bird guide have multiplied. In our view, this is not a healthy situation and a lot of energy is being wasted. Why should this be?

As we have recently pointed out (*Brit. Birds*, 65: 409-410), a large element of potential disservice to observers exists in modern identification guides. We therefore repeat our conviction that, where specific identification is difficult, the last word has yet to

be, indeed may never be, written on many species. The apparent simplification of diagnosis, occasioned so often by the mere physical dimensions of the guides and not by their authors' intents, is a constant danger to the many observers who lack the older, *slower* gospels of identification. This danger exists whenever a guide is opened, but it is at its greatest when attitudes are conditioned by either the hectic race for another 'tick' or by the instant impatience with other observers' opinions that so frequently erupts these days. Improvements in real knowledge have been accompanied by less sharing of it, and the stigmata inflicted upon observers when they make mistakes (and who does not?) can nowadays be severe.

The fine fabric of British identification science is in danger of being carelessly torn instead of constantly, carefully altered. The procession of experts (a title still merited) who have worked on field characters for so many years have commonly exhibited insight, industry and, perhaps most important, openness of mind. Hardly one has not seen some of his studies criticised, even made invalid, by later knowledge, but we should not be blinded by hindsight to the essential value of the attempts, nor downcast that they occasionally fail. The challenge in field identification remains for each individual observer, whatever his generation, and we see no new answer to it. The specious quicksilver of field guides and the random alchemy of observers are poor substitutes for the immutable and hard-won gold of *The Handbook*, and of the papers that have tried to keep the unique promise that it gave to the world.