

# *British Birds*

## Editorial

### International Congress at The Hague

Apart from their obvious function in bringing together many ornithologists from different countries, the International Ornithological Congresses give expression to current trends, feelings and problems and help us to judge how ornithology is shaping. It is with this in mind that we offer these reflections on the XV I.O.C. held at The Hague, Netherlands, from 30th August to 5th September 1970. They form a sequel to the special review on 'The Helsinki Congress and the future' in 1960 (*Brit. Birds*, 53: 447-452) and to the more general review entitled 'The International Ornithological Congresses' in 1966 (*Brit. Birds*, 59: 257-261).

Oxford 1966 inevitably recalled its predecessor of 1934. The span of recollection and comparison was stretched further between Amsterdam 1930 and this return to the Netherlands 40 years later, symbolised by an emblem of two Spoonbills in place of the earlier one. It was sad that ill-health prevented the president-elect, Professor Niko Tinbergen, from going through with it, but Dr Finn Salomonsen stepped ably in the breach. The arrangements made by the Netherlands Executive Committee under the secretary-general, Professor Dr K. H. Voous, proved highly successful. In particular, no earlier I.O.C. has been so spaciouly and excellently accommodated as was this one at the new Netherlands Congress Centre. The ample facilities for simultaneous specialist meetings and informal groups were especially valuable for that important part of the work which, as ever, went on outside the formal sessions.

Basically the timing and structure of the Congress conformed to the revised principles arising from discussions after Helsinki 1958. Opportunities for watching breeding birds were foregone in the interests of those with field studies in progress, and of discouraging the unserious. Five mornings were devoted to plenary sessions on

'Population dynamics and ecology in Tetraonids', 'Environmental Physiology', 'Development and behaviour', 'Evolution of pairing behaviour' and 'The mounting threat of chemical pollution'. Each was introduced and summed up by a specialist chairman and included some half-dozen invited contributions, followed after lunch by a panel discussion. The many simultaneous sectional sessions were concentrated during the afternoons, permitting 40 to 60 contributions to be presented and briefly discussed daily.

In theory this organisation appeared admirable, especially since the Congress Centre enabled rapid switches to be made between sections to hear particular papers of interest. In practice there were serious snags. As usual, two or more items one particularly wanted to attend would happen to clash. As usual, too many of the volunteered contributions for the sectional meetings were not sufficiently significant or well worked out to be worthy of a place on an international programme, and some of the more interesting were at least partial repetitions of something already published. Certain sessions where the homework had been done properly, such as Dr Ernst Mayr's 'Symposium on causal zoogeography', showed up the scrappy character of some others.

Even the big set-piece symposia were very uneven. Success in these demands choosing well in advance a topic in which there is keen and fairly wide interest, where several original and articulate research workers from different countries can offer something which either contributes to a fresh synthesis or throws into focus new issues and further topics for research. Nor must the need for a capable specialist chairman be overlooked. Perhaps 'The mounting threat of chemical pollution' commanded the greatest interest, and the contribution by I. Prestt and Dr D. A. Ratcliffe was a model presentation of a broad sector of the problem based on what the chairman, Dr J. J. Hickey, rightly commended as an important breakthrough in ornithological knowledge. Some of the other papers, however, were of narrow and non-ornithological specialist interest, detracting seriously from the success of what should have been an outstanding session. The symposium on the Tetraonids was an embarrassing reminder that in ornithology, as in physics and chemistry, an apparently well-conceived and admirably executed series of researches, confidently expected to resolve a range of fundamental problems, may perversely fail to do so for reasons by no means easily traced. Perhaps no other I.O.C. except Uppsala 1950 had tried so hard to bring a few of the most exciting themes of current work into focus, yet somehow it proved to yield only limited success. Was it that the themes chosen were not the most suitable, or that too many of the contributors failed to rise fully to the occasion, or that we are going through a period when there are fewer first-rate researchers developing new fields of exciting

significance? Perhaps all three of these factors and others besides may have accounted for a distinct sense of disappointment that our science and art, of which we are accustomed to expect so much, could yield so little to such a carefully planned and vigorously pursued programming effort.

Although the I.O.C. has come to assume that the whole world knows and speaks English, this is of course still far from true and there is a price to be paid for it. Of 41 listed contributors to the five plenary sessions, 17 were from the U.S.A., nine from the United Kingdom, five from English-speaking Canada, five from the Netherlands, two from the Federal Republic of Germany, one from Norway, one from Sweden and one from the U.S.S.R. Not a single contributor was from a French- or Spanish-speaking country, and barely 10% were attributable to nations where English is not widely familiar. Comparing this with the composition of the governing 'Committee of One Hundred' which is roughly only two-fifths English-speaking, and bearing in mind that the next I.O.C. will be the second in 16 years to have a French president, some doubt must be felt whether the congress may not be depriving itself on linguistic grounds of some badly-needed additional talent. Helsinki may have gone too far in catering for differing linguistic groups, but some more serious effort on their behalf may prove essential in future.

Also, although a fair number of participants happened to be, in addition, general zoologists or even botanists, and of course conservationists, there are some disturbing indications that the fuller integration of ornithology in modern biology is losing steam at just the time when it should be building up more pressure. Historically ornithology has suffered from a built-in parochialism which fits badly with the capability it has proved, as Sir Landsborough Thomson showed in his presidential address at Basel in 1954, to serve as a growing-point for biological sciences. If windows need opening to let in more light and air, this is surely one of them.

Over and over again, sometimes in very unexpected contexts, the congress found itself facing a situation where more lights on the combined ecological and ethological aspects would have illuminated its discussions. The value of bringing different lines of study to a sharp focus in terms of particular regions or areas also emerged rather backhandedly by reason of the handicaps which were so frequently encountered through want of such an approach, with the notable exception of Dr Mayr's symposium already mentioned.

The decision to hold the next I.O.C. in Australia in 1974, with Professor Dr Jean Dorst as president and Dr H. J. Frith as secretary-general, opens new opportunities but also poses new problems. Effectively, Australia will be little more remote from central Europe in 1974 than was Ithaca in 1962, but for British participants it will

mean a good deal more than simply driving on to the night ferry or flying for only as many minutes as it takes to get out to the airport. As the plans for the 1972 Pacific Science Congress show, Australia is firmly in favour of the concept of more selective thematic discussions, as against the dropical free-for-all which seems to be the destined end of international gatherings where leadership is at a discount. In extending to the new president and secretary-general our best wishes and assurances of support, let us hope that they will be able to provide in 1974 an occasion when new growing points can be stimulated and when, above all, the opportunities for giving deeper and broader focus to the results of recent ornithological progress can be fully seized.