

Private Collections and Permits.

I.

By Edwin Ashby, M.B.O.U., C.F.A.O.U., F.L.S.
Wittunga, Blackwood, S.A.

[Reprinted from "The Emu," XXII, Jan., 1923, p. 210.]

In opening a discussion on the seven resolutions recommended by the Sub-Committee and published in "The Emu," Vol. XXI, pp. 214-15, a little preliminary explanation seems necessary.

At a meeting of the Council held in Melbourne in November, 1921, the neat and final copy of the said resolutions was read, and I voiced a strong protest against either their adoption or their being put into practice until the whole of the issues involved had received more general consideration and been much more fully discussed. The Chairman at the meeting, on behalf of the Council, asked me whether I would be willing to open a discussion on the whole question of "Private Collections and Permits" at the next session of the R.A.O.U. This I agreed to do, and this paper is in fulfilment of the promise then made.

—The Seven Resolutions.—

The difficulty of attempting to handle the issues involved by these resolutions within the compass of one paper is seemingly insurmountable. To take clause by clause and fully discuss the same requires a separate paper under each clause, or nearly so; but before going further it will be well to glance at their main provisions.

The resolutions appear to me as revolutionary in character. No. I states that "recognized ornithologists," to whom permits are to be granted, must be those "pursuing some definite course of research." Not general workers, but specialized workers, confining their work within more or less narrow limits. No. II, in referring to students, states, "Permits to special research students" only are to be granted, and their work confined within apparently still narrower limits and to known species. Under No. III, "promiscuous collecting, or the formation of any new collection," is to be "discountenanced," and existing collectors, except the favoured few that come under Clause I, are to be advised to donate their collections to public institutions.

If these revolutionary resolutions were less serious in their effects the humour of them would appeal to us all. By "promiscuous collecting," the framers evidently intended to

refer to the study and collecting of Australian bird life as a whole. It apparently precludes the making of new discoveries, for the favoured few are to be limited in their research to definite species.

Those of us that have been long, and the writer has been one of the longest, in the field, can rest on their laurels, for if the apparent intentions of these resolutions are carried out no new all-round workers are to be bred and trained.

The astounding absurdity of it all, if these resolutions are carried out to the letter, is still more emphasized when one realizes that the resolutions are not intended to take effect only within a limited area, but are intended to have sway over a vast unpeopled continent.

Clause IV is obviously superfluous. Clause V recommends the Governments to consult the Union before granting permits.

I hope all will at once realize that, although I have expressed myself strongly, in no sense do I wish to be personal. It is no pleasure to me to hurt another's feelings; should my remarks appear of this character to any, I ask them to absolve me of any such intention. My years remind me that my life is nearing its setting, and I earnestly desire before I pass hence to help the rising generation into fields of study, research, and service that have so brightened my own life.

I move—

- (1) That the seven resolutions referred to be rescinded.
- (2) That an effort be made by the Union to educate first its own members, and then the public, on the educative value of private collecting.

The idea that a collection reaches its highest use when placed in a museum is largely fallacious. So much so that a Belgian specialist wrote me some time back that a museum offered him £100 for his private collection in a certain group, but he goes on to say that he preferred to give it to the writer of this paper, because, he adds, "I do not want to put it where no one will do anything about it." Collections when placed in museums are not unseldom lost as regards their educative influence on the bulk of the public. My collection, on the other hand, has been used by me as the subject-matter for numberless lectures and bird talks to thousands in South Australia and Great Britain. In England in the past few months I have often shown my skins and described the habits and habitats of the birds as many as five times in one day.

The bulk of museum collections reach only a limited number of students of the natural taxis, or classification, of birds, which is only one side, and a comparatively small one, of ornithology.

I have yet to find a museum that properly displays to the public the wonder and glory of the colouration of the Humming Birds of America. The curators of the leading museums admit this.

I think the purposes of this discussion will be best served by outlining some of the larger issues with which the leading ornithologists both of Great Britain and America are in perfect accord. Before doing so I would state for the information of members that I have left my collection of Australian bird skins to the State Museum, giving to my son, who is also a worker in ornithology, a life interest, and making provision for the use of the collection for educational purposes. Thirty-five years ago I was endeavouring to interest the young people of my own State in bird life by giving bird talks illustrated with skins, and down the years one has continued this service as opportunity permitted.

Also during the same period one has consistently co-operated with others in the obtaining of legislation for the protection of our native birds, so perhaps it will be wise to ask what is our object in getting such legislation introduced?

—Protective Legislation: Its Object and Effect.—

A learned professor asks the question, "Does education educate?" and proceeds to answer it very largely in the negative.

I ask, "Does our legislation for the protection of native bird life materially count in the attainment of that end?" I say, with possibly one or two minor exceptions, its influence from this point of view is in the majority of cases negligible. Those of us who are real bird-lovers have been responsible for the arousing of a great deal of false sentiment; the real value of our work in this direction has been the inculcation in the minds of the young of a spirit of wonder and an appreciation of the value of life. And this has done much to destroy the brute spirit which says, "It is a fine day; let us go out and kill something," with the result that many of the potential killers became to some extent bird-observers.

This has been the real good we have attained down the years of constant agitation for protective legislation. As regards the issue of the preservation of bird life other than the setting apart of sanctuaries and leaving out the commercial element, it has no influence whatever.

Nature is so prodigal in her provision for wastage that, with a few exceptions of species peculiarly isolated, the mere killing by man, except during the breeding season, which will be referred to later, has not materially counted.

We have often in Australia misled an ignorant public, who are under the false impression that "protection," or the stopping of shooting, protects. Lulled thus by a false issue, the real factor that counts is largely ignored.

The provision of suitable breeding-places and the protection of breeding haunts is the only thing that really counts. If properly attended to from the point of view only of the survival of bird life, all restriction requiring the issue of permits might be withdrawn; but on the other count, already spoken to, some restriction is desirable. I have long urged that every new township opened or surveyed by our respective Governments should have a Fauna and Flora Reserve equal in area to some of the smaller farms, set apart in perpetuity for the use and instruction of future generations.

—The Educative Value of Collections.—

Most, if not all, of the real ornithologists of the present day, whether in Australia or elsewhere, commenced in their boyhood. This is true of most branches of Natural History. *It is not that only a few children are capable of taking a real and effective interest therein, but that unless these dormant gifts are stimulated into work at a very early age, these latent possibilities atrophy.*

I have been an ardent worker in one branch or another of Natural History since the age of eight years, and speak from experience of the great blessing it has been to my life, widening and broadening its outlook and thinking.

I have the strongest conviction that nine out of every ten children are, up to an age varying with the individual, capable of developing a scientific interest in some branch of Natural History.

We call such studies hobbies, though we might use a bigger word. *I also maintain that such interest, to be effective, should be correlated with work.* The acquisitive quality of the mere collector is but one, and a necessary one, of the stimuli needed for the attainment of some measure of effective result.

To-day we are deploring the fact that such a large proportion of our Australian youth find their only relaxation in the excitement of daily entertainments or in the watching of sports.

I would that instead thereof they might become students and collectors in some branch of Natural History. As regards our

particular study, it is known to all real workers that the preservation of bird skins entails so much hard work that, leaving out the commercial issue, the only restriction required, if it could be properly enforced, is to insist that every bird killed shall be made into a skin.

Instead of the members of our Union using their powers in discouraging or preventing the Australian youth from taking up the laborious work of the making of collections of skins, it should throw its whole weight into the other scale.

Insist, if you will, that neither eggs nor skins be taken without the preservation of accurate data, but if we really love our people, and recognize any responsibility to future generations, *do what we can to multiply, not restrict, real student collectors.*

—A True Sense of Proportion.—

On the 14th June last (*i.e.*, 1922) I had the privilege of addressing the leading British ornithologists as the guest of the British Ornithologists' Club. After giving them the warm invitation of this Union to send representatives to the Adelaide Congress, I referred to the seven resolutions now under discussion, and in addition quoted from our Hon. Secretary's letter, in which he referred to the proposal to declare a thirty-mile radius round Melbourne as a bird sanctuary. *I claimed that it was the height of folly to shut out half of the growing population of the State of Victoria from any chance of becoming real student collectors.* I asked for their united opinion as to whether a much more liberalized policy was not highly desirable. To this I received the heartiest and most unanimous support.

Further, in conversation with some of England's greatest ornithologists, I explained that where possible I supported my papers in "The Emu" with reference to skins actually taken and compared, but in some cases reference to the taking of the skins was eliminated. These British ornithologists expressed the opinion that such a policy was absolutely fatal to the true scientific value of the work.

For to lay claim to being scientific is to lay claim to accuracy and truth. In such a wide and varied continent as Australia, the hard work of obtaining and preserving skins is an essential correlation to all, or nearly all, field notes.

The President of the Audubon Society followed me at the B.O. Club dinner. He stated that about five million licences to shoot are issued annually by the U.S.A., and certainly fully two million more forget to take out licences; *that something over a thousand permits for student collecting are issued—in fact, that no genuine application for student collecting is refused.*

The United States of America are in area a little less than the Australian Continent, and are occupied by one hundred and ten million people. To get a parallel of Australia's present position we must, I suppose, go back, or nearly so, to the days of George Washington. Fancy introducing such restrictive regulations as are proposed in the Sub-Committee's seven resolutions for the control of collecting in the wide, waste spaces of America as it then was!

I repeat the two resolutions I moved earlier, viz.:—

- (1) That the seven resolutions referred to be rescinded.
- (2) That an effort be made by the R.A.O. Union to educate first its own members, and then the public, on the educative value of private collecting.

And I suggest for the consideration of members—

- (a) That the Union adopt as one of the most important planks of its policy the setting apart by the various Governments of some area devoted to the preservation of the indigenous fauna and flora in connection with every new country township that is surveyed or opened.
 - (b) That farmers be urged to establish small suitable breeding areas for insectivorous birds on all their properties.
-