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The Editor,
Sir,

OYSTERCATCHER ETYMOLOGY — A REPLY

Mr R. B. Sibson's note (1973) to two apparent 'errors' in my etymological paper on Oystercatchers (Heppleston 1973) has prompted me to defend myself in public — and I am grateful to the Editor for this opportunity of doing so. Sibson disagreed with my interpretation of the words *malacophaga* and *Haematopus*.

malacophaga: its derivation is indeed Greek, not Latin — a slip which I humbly admit. One of the standard Greek-English lexicons (Liddell & Scott 1890), to which I will refer again later, gives two meanings for *malakia*:

- malakia (1) — softness
- malakia (2) — mollusca — i.e. water animals of soft substance without external shells e.g. cuttlefish (Aristotle); hard-shelled molluscs Aristotle termed 'Ostracoderma.'

Neither of these meanings refers to bivalve molluscs. Confusion arises from the use of the word *Malacology* to describe the study of molluscs, and *Malacostraca* as the name of one of the crustacean taxa; in the latter word it is the root *ostrakon* which means 'shell' — not *malaco*.

The *malacophaga* subspecies (if one accepts that it is a separate subspecies) is found in Faeroe and Iceland. In Faeroe very few Oystercatchers winter; those that do would have difficulty feeding on the shore, since there is a narrow intertidal zone on a coastline which

is precipitous in nature and frequented by storms (Dr P. J. Dare, *in litt.*) In the summer the breeders are almost entirely inland, where food is exclusively terrestrial. More Oystercatchers, however, winter in Iceland, and feed to a greater extent on intertidal foods, including mussels. Breeding birds also include some that feed entirely on shellfish, but many others (inland) that feed on earthworms and Tipulid larvae etc. (Dare *in litt.*). Thus the classical derivation of the word *malacophaga*, coupled with the fact that the majority of the birds in the area feed on terrestrial food supplies, does not permit me to withdraw my earlier interpretation.

Haematopus: Once again, I submit, the obvious derivation is not necessarily the correct one. Liddell & Scott (1890) list the word as "Haemat-opus." The position of the hyphen is important; is the same in an earlier (1869) edition; and gives an indication of the derivations of the two components of the whole word. For the true meaning and original usage of the word, the lexicon refers the reader to the Plays of Euripides.

Milman (1910) and Way (1959) offer two translations of Euripides which agree in interpretation. I quote, from the Way translation, three specific line-references given in the lexicon; each quotation refers to the use of the translated *Haemat-opus*:

The Madness of Hercules. Line 933 "...with bloodshot eye-roots..."

The Phoenician Maidens. Line 870 "...the gory ruin of his eyes..."

Orestes. Line 256 "...yon maidens gory-eyed..."

As Sibson points out, the Greek ending '-ops' certainly refers to the face or eye. If, as in *Haemat-opus*, a 'u' becomes inserted into the word, there is a strong possibility of confusion with '-pus' — the nominative form of the Greek word for foot viz. *podos*.

Hence my defence case rest upon three factors:

- (a) The use of the word by Euripides.
- (b) The meaning of the word — 'blood-stained eye/face' (Liddell & Scott).
- (c) Linnaeus came from a classical background.

These lead me, not to the dogmatic conclusion that I am right, but to a submission that my earlier (1973) derivation is probably closer to the truth than any other.

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[Mr R. B. Sibson has been invited to reply and any other classicist/zoologist may also comment in time for the next issue but this correspondence, elucidative though it is, will not be prolonged unduly. — Ed.]