The Editor,
Sir,

FALCON KILLING CATTLE EGRET

During the course of research on the New Zealand Falcon *(Falco novaeseelandiae)*, I came across an instance of a falcon killing a Cattle Egret *(Ardeola ibis coromanda)* on a station in the Waihopai Valley in May 1974.

The bird was completely white as regards feathering. The bill and circum-orbital ring were yellow. The legs were black with yellow-green soles and a slight green tinge above the knee. The measurements were as follows:

Culmen	60 mm
Wing length	257 mm
Tarsus	95 mm
Middle toe and claw	84 mm
Tail	86 mm

The specimen was donated to Canterbury Museum and identified by Ron Scarlett as a Cattle Egret in non-breeding plumage. This is named as *Ardeola ibis coromanda* in the British *Handbook* and as *Bubulcus ibis coromandus* in the N.Z. *Checklist.*

Although this is an unusual bird to feature on the prey list of the Falcon, it is not uncommon for immature female falcons to take White-faced Herons *(Ardea novaehollandiae)*. Cases which I have been able to verify of falcons taking poultry have also been the work of immature female falcons, these being the only ones large enough and inexperienced enough to tackle such large quarry.

It is unfortunate that, as in this case with the Cattle Egret, N.Z. Falcons coming near homesteads are still greeted with a charge of shot. There is no doubt that Man is directly (by killing) and indirectly (by habitat destruction) responsible for the decline of this unique falcon. Education is the only way of enforcing legislation in these remote areas.

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22 January 1975

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The Editor,
Sir,

OYSTERCATCHER ETYMOLOGY

Dictionaries, as my wise old headmaster used to say, are dangerous instruments in the wrong hands. I suspect that some unwary user has rightly resorted to Liddell & Scott, but has fallen into the trap of confusing haemat-opus (with a long penultimate ' o ') with haemato-pus (with short ' o '). Thus, his references to Euripides are quite irrelevant. If he had consulted Lewis & Short's *Latin Dictionary* or Thompson's masterly *Glossary of Greek Birds* he would have found that haematopus (blood foot/leg) occurs in Pliny and was a rare

variant for himantopus (thong foot/leg), the Greek name for the Stilt. Many centuries later, Linnaeus retained himantopus for the Stilt, but used haematopus to designate the Oystercatcher.

Let us grant that the basic meaning of malacos is soft or dainty. Are Faroese oystercatchers really more partial to a soft diet than others? Most, if not all, oystercatchers eat only the fleshy insides of the larger molluscs on which they prey. They do not consume the hard shells. Thus, the polder-frequenting oystercatchers of Holland have long favoured a soft diet such as they can find in an agricultural environment; and the same applies to many of our oystercatchers in New Zealand, especially, of course, *finschi*. In short, Faroese oystercatchers have no more claim to be called malacophagous, if malacos simply means 'soft,' than many other forms of *Haematopus*.

R. B. SIBSON

26 Entrican Avenue,
Remuera,
Auckland
20 April 1975

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The Editor,
Sir,

CLASSIFICATION OF THE RALLIDAE

Regarding Dr Fleming's suggestion that Storrs Olson's hypothesis that *dieffenbachi* was confined to the main Chatham Island and *modestus* to Mangere, could be tested by study of the abundant subfossil bone collections from the Chatham Islands, many of the earlier collections are labelled only "Chatham Islands," with no indication of the localities in the Islands from which the bones came. This is the case with the majority of the earlier collected specimens in Canterbury Museum.

However, my own collecting from 1972 to 1975 has yielded bones of *modestus* from dunes at Te One, Long Beach, Maunganui and between Maunganui and Tupuangi, Waitangi, Ouira and Cape Young in localities on the main Chatham Island (Rekohe to the Moriori, Wharekauri to the Maori) but *modestus* is not nearly as common as *dieffenbachi* which I found in nearly every dune site I have visited. Incidentally, I do not believe that *dieffenbachi* is a derivative of *philippensis*, but that *philippensis* and possibly *modestus* had a common ancestor, which may possibly yet be found in the Chathams. I certainly shall not place them in *Gallirullus*. I regard them as generically distinct. Also *dieffenbachi* did not have an "early extinction." It was still alive in the first quarter of the 19th century.

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23 April, 1975