

LETTERS

The Editor,
Sir,

6 October 1978

I have long had a grave disagreement with the 1970 *Annotated checklist of the birds of New Zealand*.

As an osteologist and systematist, I cannot agree with the relegation of Dieffenbach's Rail to a sub-species of the Banded Philippine Rail. The two are as distinct as the Takahe and Pukeko — a distinction which the 1953 *Checklist* maintained.

While I have no doubt that both rails had a common ancestor, Dieffenbach's Rail had diverged so widely in its isolation in the Chatham Island that I consider it not only specifically but generically distinct, and retain *Nesolimnas* for the genus. That, however, is a matter of personal preference and, if others use *Rallus*, it does not matter: what is important is that the two are specifically distinct. Apart from the decurved bill in *Rallus dieffenbachi* compared with the straight one in *Rallus philippensis*; *dieffenbachi* lacks a rostrum on the sternum and instead has a deeply incurved notch. The same distinction is found between *Notornis*, which also has no rostrum but instead has a similar incurved notch, and *Porphyrio* which has a pronounced sternal rostrum.

The pelvis of *dieffenbachi* is also more curved along the ilia in lateral aspect than is *philippensis*, but this and the much greater size of *dieffenbachi* are of less importance.

I admit the plumage similarities between both rails, but then Takahe and Pukeko also share plumages that are much alike. As the immortal Huckleberry Finn replied when Tom Sawyer quoted "Birds of a feather flock together," "No indeed they don't, Tom. There ain't two birds more alike than a crow bird and a jay bird, and them two birds don't flock together not no how."

This seems an appropriate place to correct a serious misprint in the 1970 *Checklist* in Appendix C. *Euryapteryx gravis* (Owen 1870). The locality list should be "N.Is. (rare) S.Is. Stewart Island."

R. J. SCARLETT

Osteologist, Canterbury Museum.

The Editor,
Dear Sir,

5 January 1979

Despite the risks of offending Archie Blackburn, for whom I have the greatest respect, and of defending jargon, for which I plead guilty, I feel a response to Blackburn (*Notornis* 25: 256) is required.

Jargon is, unfortunately, an accepted and often necessary part of the language of science. Its function lies primarily in streamlining

technical communication between specialists in a field. In a journal of such general readership as *Notornis* its use should certainly be avoided wherever possible. There are times, however, when jargon terms become increasingly accepted in laymans language — an acceptance which is justified by the usefulness of the terms. "Evolution" and "territory" are two such terms which, despite extremely wide use and acceptance, do not yet have definitions that are totally acceptable to all biologists. That a term is jargon is not good enough reason, of itself, for outright rejection of its use.

The term "strategy" has gained increasing acceptance in the biological literature in recent years. References to foraging strategies, growth strategies, breeding strategies, evolutionary strategies, etc., abound, and I submit that popularisation of the term by North Americans is not a reason for its rejection. Traditional meanings of "strategy" are those given by Blackburn, but in recent American dictionaries the term is also defined more generally: "a plan or technique for achieving some end" (Funk and Wagnalls, 1974); "the art or skill of using stratagems in politics, business, courtship, or the like" (Heritage, 1973); "a stratagem, plan, etc.", with stratagem defined as "any tricky ruse" (Websters, 1977). Changes in meanings of words in the English language are a part of our cultural evolution. Outright rejection of such changes, as implied by Blackburn's use of the term "absurd," can only stultify an evolution which is essential in a rapidly changing society.

A major problem with "strategy" in the biological literature is the overtones of teleology in its meaning. Thus Blackburn asks "are birds capable of planning . . . ?". In fact, end directed behaviour can, and must, be a part of an animal's existence. Reproduction, which ensures survival of genes through generations, is the classic example of this. All animals exhibit behaviour for which the end product is reproduction, even if this is a simple release of gametes. This behaviour need not, however, result from conscious selection of behaviours from a series of alternatives. Behaviours leading up to reproduction are a direct result of natural selection acting on preceding generations. The "end" is maximal production of reproducing offspring. In a sense, this is compatible with definitions of strategy involving war, since animals compete for resources as a part of their strategy.

I am prepared to argue that if eminent British biologists such as J. Maynard Smith and Richard Dawkins (see the evolutionary stable strategy, or ESS, in Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 1976, Oxford University Press) are happy to use the term, then it is acceptable in *Notornis*.

Yours faithfully,

IAN G. McLEAN

*Department of Zoology, Biological Sciences Centre, The University of
Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada*