

LETTERS

The Editor,
Sir,

BIOGRAPHIES IN NOTORNIS

What Mr. J. M. Cunningham writes is always interesting if not always right. The validity of some of his reasoning in a letter (*Notornis* 21: 89) is open to question on a number of points.

It has been customary to commemorate with Obituaries members who during their lives gave long or distinguished service. Under the present dispensation a number of transient 'bird-spotters' whose contributions to the ornithology of New Zealand are dubious or minimal, have been rated worthy of overlong 'write-ups' in *Notornis*.

A rising generation of would-be scientists is nourished on the principle of 'Publish or perish' — another manifestation perhaps of the 'rat-race' — and publish they do, regardless of the quality or value of their findings. Only too often, it seems, well known facts or obvious platitudes are dressed up in jargon in the hope that they will be hailed as scientific discoveries.

Thus among the conclusions in a paper (*Notornis* 20: 1-4) we are told that "It is our view that Yellow-eyed Penguin egg and chick survival on the Otago Peninsula is clearly being adversely affected by farm animal and human interference," etc., which is just a clumsy way of saying that people out for a walk and farm animals are likely to cause the loss of eggs and chicks — or, if you so wish, upset the breeding of Yellow-eyed Penguins. Hardly an original thought! Moreover how worthwhile are the proffered statistics? The Otago Peninsula is long and rugged and it is a fair guess that the 19 nests found, on which the statistics were based, were in accessible places not far off the beaten track.

The accompanying biography (p. 93) is a fine example of periphrastic verbiage. But when the author writes "I got started" etc., that was the last straw and it broke at least one camel's back.

Traditionally the Editor of *Notornis* is held on a very loose rein and has wide freedom of action. He is nevertheless responsible to the Council and he would be an unwise editor who disregarded its wishes. It is not the Editor but the Council which controls the finances and has to foot the bill. The Council might jib at having to pay for tedious trifles. Surely the criteria for acceptance of material for publication in *Notornis* should be:— Is it about birds? Is it new? Is it true? Is it readable? Twenty pages of red meat are more nourishing than eighty pages of skilly.

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[I had to look up the OED to see what "skilly" is. Now that I know, I believe I can appreciate that Mr Sibson's 15 years

as Editor of *Notornis* have qualified him admirably to suggest what "the criteria for acceptance of material for publication in *Notornis* should be." I am bound to suggest, however, in a way that he, at least, will understand — "*Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.*" — Ed.]



The Editor,
Sir,

SOME SEABIRD RECORDS IN NOTORNIS

In the course of scanning the world's seabird literature I have just taken a three-volume dose of *Notornis*. It seemed wholesome, indeed impressive, if a bit solid (a little more sugar on the pill would do no harm), were it not for one or two small points that made it stick a little. Since I observe that a third of the way through it acquired a new Editor who wrote ([Dawson] 1972) "I would welcome, indeed encourage, controversy and discussion in the pages of *Notornis*. Too often a paper is printed and becomes accepted fact even if its readers hold contrary views, reticent though they may be in expressing them. Too many myths have already appeared in New Zealand ornithology about matters that are said to be 'well known' or are spoken of but never published. Letters to the Editor and critical reviews will always be welcome" I also notice a provocative review of volume 22 of *Sea Swallow* last year (E.W.D. 1973) which appears attributable to the same source. As Confucius remarked, those who are afraid of lightning should not fly kites, so let us also take up a few points in *Notornis*!

If we start with a bird I have actually seen, long ago at a great distance in a bad light (normally I try to avoid this, because as Oscar Wilde remarked in another context, it does prejudice a man so), your reviewer remarked on "a profound need for better guides and critical studies, such as we have had in *Notornis* on . . . the Soft Plumaged Petrel, by people who really know their seabirds, which might stress in particular, the pitfalls awaiting the beginner or those, experienced elsewhere, who move into a new geographical area . . ." If we refer back to this generally admirable study (Harper 1973) I observe on p. 200 the statement "another belief to be disposed of is that *Pterodroma mollis* has a dark phase. Authentic specimens to support this are so few and of doubtful origins that it would appear at most to be a rare aberration."

I do not disagree with this, but I wonder whether this study and the previous one by Harper, Watson & Angle (1972) of the Kerguelen Petrel (*Pterodroma brevirostris*) could not be considered more thorough if they had noticed that I once took the trouble to investigate this dark morph (Bourne 1957)? About a tenth of the available specimens of Soft-plumaged Petrel (which may well have been selected) have the back suffused with sepia pigment which extends anteriorly as a breast band and ventrally as streaking of the belly. Two extreme examples, one from Gough Island and one taken at 36°S. 88°55'E. by John Gould, are almost uniformly dark and very like a Kerguelen Petrel, from which they may be distinguished by their broader bills, wider primaries with dark centres and shafts where these are pale in the Kerguelen Petrel, pale bases to the feathers of the