

3 May 1978

M. E. Coles
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Dear M. E. Coles:

The National Audubon Society sent me for reply your letter critical of my photographic activities. I understand your concern and disapproval but possibly you do not understand my motives in describing my experience with the ruby-crowned kinglets. I was not boasting. I could have remained silent about the episode but I felt candor was my only proper alternative for avoiding misrepresentation. Moreover, I had another reason for giving this account which involved the remarkable behavior of the kinglets. I was tremendously impressed by their adaptability, persistence, and poignant devotion to their young. This kind of behavior may not be appreciated by all who observe birds and, therefore, deserved to be reported.

I doubt that I can mollify your anger by telling you that this procedure with the kinglets has never before or since resulted in injury to birds. I admit that the kinglet accident was attributable to an error on my part, but to insist that the procedure must be abandoned because of one mishap is to take a very uncompromising line.

Allow me to point out that all photography of nesting birds, even simple observation of them at their nests, even the discovery of nests, risks to some extent the bird's welfare. Predators are attracted by the trails left by humans or by slight alterations in the immediate environment. I think bird photographers among your countrymen will confirm this statement.

To put bird photography in a proper perspective it should be recognized as an activity that does not purposely injure birds as compared with the activities of some painters of birds who shoot their subjects as John James Audubon did. Ornithologists are also guilty of excessive collecting for their own or for institutional skin collections. They justify the killing of large numbers of birds in order to establish taxonomic variations and geographical distribution. How many series of skins of a particular species are needed for the study of the

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fine points of classification? How important anyway is this information to human knowledge? Do the activities of scientists, classifiers and behaviorists, who necessarily must often destroy the subjects of their inquiry serve a more useful purpose for the protection and preservation of birds against extermination than do those of photographers whose work encourages an appreciation for the importance and beauty of these creatures?

Yours sincerely,

Robert P. Bates

cc: The National Audubon Society

UNCLASSIFIED

Gilbert bond