

September 27, 1945

Mr. J. Victor Skiff
Deputy Commissioner
Conservation Department
Albany, New York

Dear Mr. Skiff:

Chapter 12 of the ruffed grouse book reached me just when I was bogged down with new students, hence my reading of it had to be quick and superficial. I found it so interesting that I got up before daylight this morning in order to get through a little more of it than would otherwise have been possible.

If you will permit me, let me first offer some opinions (based on costly experience) which may reassure you and the commissioner.

These data are so uncommon and so important to wildlife management that no two critics are going to agree on the adequacy of their presentation.

Likewise no two technical men confronted with these data would present them in the same way.

The only thing you need worry about is that your presentation is clear and simple and that opinion is so labelled and distinguishable from deduction.

By and large the last half of the chapter (on fluctuation) shows a surer touch than the first half on internal mechanism; in fact I am full of enthusiasm for the second half.

Perhaps one reason for this is that the second half is presented in a frame-work of continental experience; that is to say, your data are compared with those of other authors and regions. By contrast the first half is rather "isolationist". Take, for example, the inverse relation between breeding stock and summer gain; this is more clearly apparent in Ralph King's Minnesota data than in yours, but this fact is not mentioned. The paper does not mention Errington's Prairie du Sac data, doubtless for the reason that these refer mainly to quail and did not become available until early this year. Just to make sure you have them, I am sending you a reprint. Perhaps it would be too big a job to revise the manuscript, but an explanatory foot note might be in order.

Turning now to detail: I am handicapped by not having the other chapters in which much confirmatory evidence probably occurs. Never-the-less, there are some assertions which I suspect are opinion or belief without being so labelled.

For example on page 19 is the assertion that "birds of the year are mostly involved" in fall or spring shuffle. I cannot see how this could be supported except by banding.

Again on page 36 there is an assertion about buffers that seems at best only observational. The same is true on page 48. If my conjecture is correct, the wording should make this clear.

On page 39 there is an assertion about high per cent of breeding failure. If this means a high percent of non-breeders I do not see how there could be any supporting evidence.

Most of the manuscript is clear and simple in presentation, but there are a few spots which trail off into vague obscurities: for example, the top of page 35. It would seem to be better either to strike these out or to say flatly that we don't know. The existence of these spots should not obscure the general high score for plain clear presentation. As compared with Errington's paper you have the edge for clarity and simplicity. I pick out Errington because it is the closest parallel.

Both this paper and Errington's lack a clear summary of over-all interpretation. What I mean here is a partial (and necessarily speculative) answer to the basic question "What light have I thrown on the internal mechanism of populations?" This, however, is a pardonable fault because it is probably not yet time for anybody to answer this question. It may be partially answered a decade or two hence.

Let me urge with all possible emphasis that you continue to gather the basic data on your areas. Every additional year adds greatly to the value. Your group deserves a great deal of credit for having hung on thus far, but I notice a partial lapse since 1942. I know this was the war and I also know that most outfits threw up the sponge entirely during the war. I believe, however, that New York has a responsibility to the whole country to keep this thing going.

With personal regards, yours sincerely,

Aldo Leopold

P.S. I enclose an extra copy for Gardiner Bump which I hope you will forward. I also take the liberty of sending a copy to Errington.

cc Bump
✓ Errington