The *Naval Chronicle* for 1799 (Vol. I., p. 127) contains the following paragraph :—

" The following is a copy of a letter found tied to the neck of a Hawk caught on the 4th September, 1795, by Mr. Malcolm of Kinghorn, in Scotland. It was picked up by him the day it was written, and had come at least 50 leagues, the 'Texel'* being then about 70 leagues distant.

On board the 'Lion,' Sept. 4th, 1795.

I send this from on board the 'Lion' of 64 guns, twenty-five leagues off the Texel, in chase of a frigate and sloop of war. He that gets this letter will put it in the newspaper.

Richard Wilkinson, Midshipman."

The foregoing is interesting as being an early example of marking birds and noting their movements. Had the times of despatch and capture been noted, the speed of flight might have been calculated. The distance from Kinghorn, in the Firth of Forth, opposite Leith, to the Texel is roughly 350 miles, so the Hawk must have flown about 265 miles.

C. SUFFERN.

FAREHAM, HANTS, *November 20th*, 1920.

UNACCEPTABLE RECORD OF LONG-TAILED DUCK BREEDING IN IRELAND.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—Amongst a collection of eggs, the property of an anonymous vendor, advertised for sale at Stevens' on November 23rd, 1920, was a clutch of four duck's eggs described in the catalogue as " Long-tailed Duck c/4, with lining of nest ; Lough Neagh, Ireland, 3rd of June, 1914 ; very rare British eggs." I am not in the habit of buying eggs, but I gave instructions to have these purchased for me, as in the interests of Irish ornithology I considered the record should be either proved or otherwise at once.

Much encouraged by the statement in the catalogue that " all eggs offered are guaranteed authentic by the Collector, who will be glad to furnish further notes on request," I tried to trace these eggs from the beginning, with the following result. They belonged to a collector who died some years ago, and passed with other eggs to his brother. The latter sold the collection to the vendor mentioned above, and then destroyed all papers and records relating to it, so he has no idea from whom this set originally came !

I have not had these eggs examined—they are accompanied, by the way, with no down—as even should they belong to this species, we cannot admit a new record for Ireland on the slender evidence of a data ticket alone.

C. J. CARROLL.

FETHARD, CO. TIPPERARY, *Jan.* 1921.

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS FEEDING ON OYSTERS.

To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.

SIRS,—On looking over a paper by Mr. Edward Fleisher on the " Birds of South-eastern North Carolina," published in the *Auk* for October 1920, I came across a passage referring to the American Oystercatcher (*Hæmatopus palliatus*) feeding upon the oyster. Catesby appears to have been the first author to suspect the Oystercatcher

* *Sic.* ? mistake for " Lion."

of opening up oysters, and his observations were also made in the State of Carolina. Prof. Newton, however, regarded Catesby's statement as untrustworthy; and later writers, with some exceptions, have also doubted or denied the possibility of the Oystercatcher feeding upon oysters. That the British species does not, at the present time, open oysters, will, I suppose, be generally admitted. The activities of *H. palliatus*, in this connection, are, therefore, a matter of some interest. In response to a request for further information, Mr. Fleisher very kindly sent me details of his observations and gave his permission to have them published on this side. The following is a transcript of the relevant part of his letter:

"On Smith's Island at the mouth of the Cape Fear River in south-eastern North Carolina there are extensive mud-flats exposed at low tide. These are dotted with small and large clumps of oysters (*Ostrea virginica*), consisting of old and young and dead oysters in a solid mass. As I remember most of the oysters point upward. In almost every clump that I noticed particularly, there were some large old oysters and some young ones, the latter generally on the periphery of the clumps.

"The Oystercatchers were common where the oysters were, and in almost every clump the small molluscs were open and empty. The first one I looked at had a trace of flesh clinging to the shell. Another in the same clump was clear of flesh. About most of the clumps, where the nature of the ground permitted, there was a lace-work of tracks, which, I thought, included those of the Oystercatcher. I paid little further attention to the oysters and did not actually see any birds operating on them. The birds were rather shy. I might add that, while I took no measurements, I am sure that none of the open shells, that I saw, was as much as three inches long. . . . I felt convinced that the birds did open and eat the small oysters. In my paper I said '. . . . the small clumps of oysters on the mud-flats showed evidence of their work. In most cases, the smaller molluscs on the outside of the clumps were the ones that were opened and the larger ones left alone.' I realize now that the evidence was circumstantial and may not be considered conclusive. I do not remember whether any of the valves were fractured. . . . I am still of the opinion that *H. palliatus* fed upon the oysters at Smith's Island."

Although, as Mr. Fleisher states, his evidence is only circumstantial, I do not think there can be any doubt that *H. palliatus* can and does feed upon the smaller individuals of the American oyster, and that Catesby was perfectly correct in his surmise. While *H. palliatus* and *ostralegus* appear to be much alike in size and appearance and in strength of bill, there are considerable differences between *Ostrea virginica* and *O. edulis*. Both are thick-shelled. But the former grows more in length than in breadth as compared with the latter, being four or five times as long as broad, while *O. edulis* is not much longer than broad. This difference should give the adductor muscle which closes the valves more purchase in *O. virginica* than in *O. edulis*, the more so as the muscle is inserted distally to the centre of the valve. Hence it would appear that *H. palliatus* has a bigger job in opening the shells of *O. virginica* than it would have if *O. edulis* were its food-supply. In view of Mr. Fleisher's observations, there is now no *a priori* reason why *H. ostralegus* should not be able to open oysters; and, in my belief, it would readily do so if intertidal oysters were available on the shores of this country.

J. M. DEWAR.

EDINBURGH, *Dec.* 1920.