

## SUGGESTIONS REGARDING THE SYSTEMA AVIUM

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**T**HERE IS NEED of a good check list of the birds of the world. The lists now available are out of date, and for other reasons none of them was ever satisfactory for general use.

A world list should include features that are not found in any list so far issued. Of first importance is the sanction of an international body, so that the ornithologists of all nations will feel a personal interest in the publication. It is therefore necessary that an international body adopt rules of nomenclature that will be acceptable to the majority of working ornithologists. The various groups should be willing to compromise their differences of opinion on minor points for the sake of uniformity in nomenclature. The usefulness of Sharpe's Hand-list is injured by slight differences between the American and the British rules.

Of next importance is the selection of a small representative committee that shall prepare a list with reasonable speed. A large part of the list can be made from existing lists and from monographic works. Little time should be spent upon the validity of newly described species, but they should all be included. When reasonable doubt as to the validity of a species exists, its name might be included in the synonymy, printed in distinctive type or indicated by a conventional sign. Completeness and speed in the preparation of such a list are far more important than final decision with regard to species based on slight or imaginary characters.

To win the place that it should have and hold, our list must be well handled typographically. Dubois's list is well prepared in some ways, but its usefulness is almost destroyed by the poor selection of type faces and the cumbersome size of the page. Sharpe's list avoids these bad features, but is injured by the maddening arrangement of its indices and by the lack of references. The first part of Mathew's list of Australian birds, in *Birds of Australia*, is confusing because of his method of treatment of subspecies.

A convenient type measure is 24 by 40 picas, printed on paper of 6 by 9¼ inches. This is the size of the Check-list of North American Birds. A little larger type page, such as that used for the Proceedings of the United States National Museum and many other United States Government publications, might well be used. This page measures 26 by 46 picas on paper of 6 by 9¾ inches, untrimmed. The paper should be light and thin, so as to reduce bulk and weight. The matter of type, both as to size and face, should receive careful consideration. Accepted names of species and genera should be printed in a heavy-face type. Gothic type is very clear, but is somewhat too harsh and stiff for our purpose. Clarendon is often used, but in the usual fonts is too much condensed. Antique seems to me the most suitable face for generic and specific headings, and is the most pleasing mate for standard roman.

The names of species and the notes on distribution should be set in 8 point type, synonymy in 6 point, both leaded, with extra space above flush lines. The use of these small type would save much space, and as more names would appear on each page, a required name would be more easily found.

Generic names should be repeated before their respective specific names, as in the American list; this is a great help, especially in large genera in which

the species run over from one page to another. Serial numbers for families, genera, and species, as in Sharpe's Hand-list, seem to be of no value whatever. A continuous series of numbers for all species, as in the American list, is convenient for marking eggs and in making lists of exchange specimens. Additional names can be numbered by the decimal system.

The value of our world check list will be much more increased, if it contain some synonymy for each species. This synonymy should include reference to the original description or basis of the name; reference to the accepted combination, if different from the original; reference to a few monographic works or faunas containing full synonymies—for example, the Catalogue of Birds of the British Museum and Ridgway's Birds of North and Middle America; reference to a good plate or to such other illustration as exists. The synonymy for most species would not run over two or three lines and would seldom be over six lines. The information contained therein would be well worth the space.

In Sharpe's Hand-list there are approximately 22,000 genera and species, listed on 2,066 pages in five volumes. It ought to be possible to put the world list, including the index, in five volumes of 500 pages each. The pagination should be continuous, so as to simplify the indexing.

I am disappointed to notice comment to the effect that a new edition of the Check-list of North American Birds is to be prepared "which should constitute the nearctic volume of the proposed 'Systema Avium' to be gotten up by the B. O. U. and the A. O. U. jointly." This idea does not at all fit my conception of what is needed. We should have one check list to include all the genera and species of the world in systematic order, so that one list will come to be used by ornithologists the world over.

The members of a national organization, such as the American Ornithologists' Union or the British Ornithologists' Union, probably think that it is beyond the province of their society to consider the status or the nomenclature of exotic species of birds. If this be true, and I do not undertake to contest it, then there is need of an international society or committee that shall consider the nomenclature of the birds of Timbuctoo with the same interest as that of the birds of the San Francisco Bay region, the District of Columbia, or the British Isles.

The interest of the student should not stop at an international boundary line. That a species is not known to occur north of the Rio Grande is a poor reason for barring a specimen from the cabinet of an American ornithologist. However, the American list tends to bring about this absurd discrimination against all foreign species to the detriment of the individual student. In other words, the majority of American ornithologists are extremely provincial with regard to birds. Fortunately Mr. Ridgway's stupendous work on the birds of North and Middle America and the activity of a few other Americans in their study of South American birds will help to break down this artificial barrier.

European ornithologists seem to have been keener in the study of exotic faunas and floras than have Americans. With the British there have been two very efficient causes leading to this condition. In the first place the birds of the British Isles had been studied and named for years before there was an ornithologist in North America. In the second place Britain's overseas territorial interests have thrown English naturalists into exotic fields, and their collections have helped to build up the magnificent series in the British Mu-

seum of Natural History and in the National Herbarium at Kew.

Another factor in developing a cosmopolitan interest among British ornithologists has been the Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum. In this enormous work all of the specimens of each species in the British Museum were listed, and so its title is justified; but fortunately the catalogue not only lists the specimens of birds in the British Museum, but also gives synonymies and descriptions of all known species. This series of volumes must have been a great influence in attracting donations of specimens to the British Museum.

The publication of the Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum unavoidably took many years—the first volume was out of date and out of print before the final volume was issued. Sharpe's Hand-list remedies this to a certain extent. With the aid of the Zoological Record and other review publications it is now reasonably easy to keep posted on the new genera and species as they are described. In this connection the reviews in the leading ornithological journals are important, and it should not be forgotten that the review section of the Auk is one of the most accurate in recording new generic and specific names.

Sharpe's Hand-list, through motives of economy perhaps, is not nearly so useful as it might be. Here is a list reduced to almost its lowest terms so far as information goes. With better typographical arrangement it could have been printed on fewer pages with no loss in clearness. Its gravest defect is the lack of primary references. For nine-tenths of the generic and specific names Sharpe gives no other reference than the Catalogue of Birds; for names of more recent date, the original references are given. To add to the difficulty of locating the subject of search in the index, each volume has separate pagination. Dubois produced a two-volume list with continuous pagination and primary citations for species. In spite of these advantages the large page of the Synopsis Avium has probably prevented its more general use. Aside from Sharpe and Dubois, no one has attempted a world list in recent years.

If such a work is to be printed, it should be completed and placed on sale with reasonable expedition so that it can be used. It is impossible to get a list of this sort so that it will suit everyone. Probably we shall never agree as to the limits of *Larus*, *Charadrius*, *Ochthodromus*, *Anas*, *Tringa*, *Ammodramus*, *Lanius*, *Ptilopus*, and dozens of other genera. Let the committee steer a middle course and neither a lumpner nor a splitter be, for in this way will the need of the greatest number be served.

An international committee might take such a list as Sharpe's, revise the nomenclature and distribution notes, add synonymies and new species, and thus produce something that all the world could use.

Of course such a list would be imperfect and would contain many mistakes, but it would give us some confidence in the names accepted, which cannot be said of some of the numerous genera and subspecies that have been described in various publications. I do not mean that I object to the discussion and description of new genera and species. However, it is often impossible to judge of the validity of these new forms. Here is where a committee on nomenclature has its field of action. If I have the necessary specimens, I can satisfy myself as to the validity of the new forms proposed and will accept or reject the names as I think best. As the matter stands, however, one author unites several genera that have been long recognized, and another separates them again and creates a few new generic names. In such a case, lacking suitable material

for several of the species, I am at a loss to know which author to follow. If a committee that has a reputation for good judgment and fairness passes on the case, I will follow its ruling.

The American Ornithologists' Union Committee rulings do not always agree with my ideas, but were I writing on United States birds I would follow the American Check-list.

The Union has furnished an immense stimulus to the development of ornithology in the United States and has been a drag on wild and unreasoning publication. It does not seem impossible that an international union or committee could exert a similarly desirable influence on systematic ornithology in all countries.

Another salutary effect of an international list would be to show local students that some of the genera with which they are familiar contain related species in neighboring countries.

In the *Manual of North American Birds* and in the *Birds of North and Middle America*, Ridgway includes some species on the above basis; this should be considered a highly commendable feature of this author's remarkably thorough work. The preparation of the manuscript for such books involves an immense amount of study of related species, and Mr. Ridgway fully realizes that the study of birds should include all birds, not only a lot of species selected because of geographic or political divisions. Although, because of mechanical considerations, the species treated in one work must be limited in some way, every opportunity should be given the beginner to realize so far as he can the relation of his local species, genera, and families to those of the world at large. Few of us could afford to possess the twenty-seven volumes of the *Catalogue of Birds*, even were none of them out of print or out of date; but a useful check list of the birds of the world could be sold at a price within the reach of many students. Such a work would go far to dispel the provincialism of which I complain and would bring about a better understanding and a greater spirit of coöperation among the ornithologists of the world.

It is easy to describe the kind of list that one would wish to see published, but its preparation involves an immense amount of labor by the men who are generous enough to undertake it.

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