

cal specimen and returned it to the source of enquiry, later to hear that it was the bird in question without doubt. It seems difficult to account for the unprecedented numbers, unless it is the effect of the general prohibition of spring shooting on the continent during the last few years.

*University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, October 24, 1922.*

## THOUGHTS ON ENGLISH NAMES FOR BIRDS IN THE A. O. U. CHECK-LIST

By W. L. McATEE

PAPERS presented at the 1921 meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union and others that have appeared in print at intervals have contained suggestions and criticisms relative to the English names of birds appearing in the Check-List. It seems to the writer that these arguments have lacked cogency and force to a great extent because the object to be accomplished has never been clearly defined. Bluntly, what is the object of incorporating a set of English bird names in the Check-List? That question must be clearly answered before an intelligent selection of names can be made.

Some writers evidently lean toward the view that the non-technical names of the Check-List should reflect popular usage. Again, in this connection, a serious question immediately arises—What is popular usage? Check-List territory is a large one, and however much we may dislike the idea, it is strongly sectionalized. One need only recall popular designations of a few of these sections as The South, Way Down East, and the Corn Belt, to realize that even among the English speaking part of our population, grouping is evident and that it undoubtedly strongly influences usage in bird-names. In addition we have the Mexican Border, we have localities chiefly populated by Indians, communities strongly Bohemian, Swedish, German, or Russian; we have Louisiana, home of the Creoles, and French Canada; in all, sectionalization so pronounced as to make the question, What is popular usage?, an unanswerable one. Usage in bird names is not only local, but often changeable, even whimsical. It cannot be accurately reflected in a list of bird names—one name to the species—such as we incorporate in the Check-List. Rather, a catalogue or dictionary of names would be required.

Only a comprehensive knowledge of local bird names also, will serve for another purpose, namely legal use, for which some might think an authoritative standard list sufficient. No, when in court, the terms used in local legislation must be used, and to hardly a less degree the colloquial nomenclature of the people concerned. Local bird names have been made official by being incorporated into laws. Consider the following, for instance, from a Louisiana bird-protection act: grosbec, poule d'eau, chorook and papabotte; and these from a Florida law: joeree, pond bird, red warbler, and plume bird. In trials, therefore, to which the ornithologist may be called, he must be familiar with bird names that never have received recognition by the Check-List. To secure conviction

by a jury, it must be shown that the blue quail or butcherbird, for example, which perhaps the defendant admits he has killed, not the scaled partridge or loggerhead shrike of the Check-List, are protected birds. It is evident that the Check-List with its single series of vernacular names cannot be our guide in legal proceedings and this chiefly on account of the great diversity in local nomenclature.

Another school of thought holds that Check-List vernacular names should mould usage. Unless one is thinking in terms of generations, it is safe to say that the same causes that prevent reflection of popular usage also defy attempts to control or standardize it. *Colinus virginianus* still is the quail or the partridge in spite of the Check-List's stand for Bob-white. This is the case with a universally known bird; such names as Pomarine Jaeger and Xantus' Becard have no relation to usage. One may think that Slate-colored Junco and Red-breasted Merganser are gaining usage because he hears them from the lips of those who have learned them from books. But what a minority these are to those who know the species as Snowbird and Fish Duck! In a long course of time Check-List English names for birds might achieve currency through being taught to children in schools, but only then if not stilted or cumbersome. If such gradual influence on usage is the object of the code of English names, selection must be made with the requirements of brevity, aptness, and ease of pronunciation and remembering, always in mind.

If we conclude, as the writer thinks we must, that either conforming to usage to a satisfactory degree or doing anything practical in attempting to mould it, is too large a problem for successful solution through the medium of the English Check-List names, we find ourselves farther than ever from an answer to the query—Just what is the field for this formal code of English names? Is its main use that of affording a duplicate set of designations for every form whether species or subspecies for use in local lists, exchange catalogs and the like? If so, is it not subject to the inevitable criticism of all duplications, that it has only a limited usefulness and represents therefore more or less a waste of effort? What purpose does a conventional set of English names serve in such a connection that is not served by the technical names? If instability of the latter is urged as an objection, relief can be obtained by using only those names cited in a specified edition of the Check-List. However, the superior stability of vernacular over scientific bird names is not given great weight by those who have catalogued the former and are aware of such totals as 53 different cognomens for the Tip-up, 82 for the Hairy-head and 109 for the Stiff-tail\*.

Apart from the matter of stability it would surely seem that usage in formal lists of birds for subspecies never distinguished by the public is a rather barren purpose for a set of non-technical Check-List names, certainly one over which no great pains and labor are called for.

On the other hand it is necessary to use English names for *species* of birds in popular manuals and in bulletins intended for distribution to the public. What are the most desirable names for this purpose is subject to discussion; in general it would seem that highly artificial names are not the best.

To sum up, it is obvious that the single series of English names of the

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\*The follower of the check-list may know these respectively as Spotted Sandpiper, Hooded Merganser and Ruddy Duck, but I have used alternative names in this connection to point the moral.

Check-List cannot reflect an extremely heterogeneous popular usage; it would appear also that definite teaching value of the code of names as at present constituted, as well as effectiveness in shaping usage, remains to be proved. A reference set of vernacular names of *species* of birds is of value in connection with popular handbooks and bulletins; but it is not apparent what valuable use there is for made-to-order names for all of the *subspecies*, that is not fully served by the scientific names.

Washington, D. C., October 9, 1922.

## COMMENTS ON TWO RECENT NUMBERS OF BENT'S LIFE HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS

By G. WILLETT

ON READING the last two numbers of Mr. Bent's splendid work (U. S. Nat. Mus. Bulls. 113 and 121), several items contained therein seem to the writer to call for a certain amount of enlargement or criticism. Therefore the following notes are submitted as of possible interest to CONDOR readers.

**Larus glaucescens.** Glaucous-winged Gull. In regard to this species the statement is made on page 70 of Bulletin 113 that no evidence was found to show that it eats the eggs of other species of birds. Previous to the summer of 1920 all information secured by the writer during several years of close observation of the species on its breeding grounds would certainly have led one to believe that it lacked the egg-stealing propensities of its more southern relative, *Larus occidentalis*. The natural food of the Glaucous-winged Gull is small fish—in southeastern Alaska the herring—and it is doubtful whether it resorts to egg stealing when this food is to be readily obtained.

During the summer of 1920, which the writer spent on Forrester Island, the herring, though present in considerable numbers throughout the summer, for some reason seldom rose to the surface of the water where the gulls could obtain them. The puffins and cormorants secured their rations without difficulty, by diving, but the gulls were forced to seek their subsistence elsewhere. In early summer they ate shell-fish, crabs, etc., to a large extent, but later, after the cormorants and murrens had laid their eggs, these constituted the most important item on the menu of the gulls. Mr. A. M. Bailey, at that time with the Biological Survey, was with the writer on several occasions when the gulls were seen busily engaged in pilfering their food from the nests of murrens and cormorants. The latter, in particular, were so persistently robbed that visits to their colonies in late summer showed a large proportion of their nests to be empty and most of the others to contain but one or two young to the nest.