

The scientific names in Oberholser's "The bird life of Texas"

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*a word of caution
on the premature adoption
of the author's "new" nomenclature*

The publication in 1974 of "The bird life of Texas," edited and condensed to two large volumes by Edgar B. Kincaid, Jr. from a gigantic manuscript by the late Harry C. Oberholser, represents a major addition to the list of state bird books. Its significance with respect to Texas ornithology *per se* will no doubt be analyzed by experts in the book review sections of several journals. Some aspects of the text as published are highly controversial; these center on the decision to retain certain portions of Dr. Oberholser's manuscript exactly as he wrote them, even though a substantial body of opinion held that this material was redundant, obsolete, or both. This paper will deal only with the scientific nomenclature, a subject barely touched upon in the introductory pages written by the editor and others.

Dr. Harry C. Oberholser died in 1963, at the age of 93, by which time his most active period of research and publication was long past. His name and his career may thus be unfamiliar to a younger generation of ornithologists and birders. It would be natural for that large majority of bird students whose specialties are *not* taxonomy and nomenclature to believe that the names used in "The bird life of Texas," which, after all, was published in 1974, represent the latest thinking, the results of the most up-to-date research. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Dr. Oberholser was perhaps the last survivor and the most extreme practitioner in the United States of a school of taxonomy that believed that *any* differences should be recognized nomenclatorially.

The result was a great proliferation of genera, many or even most containing but a single species. At the subspecific level, Dr. Oberholser proposed or used scientific names for scores of populations of birds characterized by slight differences in size, proportions or color tones (often obtained from very small samples). It has been suggested that his ability to separate series of birdskins into "subspecies" based on the subtlest of color differences had its origin in his early training as a ribbon salesman, when a keen eye for tints and shades was vital for matching ribbons and fabrics. This is not to suggest that Dr. Oberholser never described subspecies of birds that are well differentiated by current standards. Many of the generally accepted subspecific names in the A.O.U. Check-list bear his name as author. Nevertheless the fact remains that by the standards prevailing among taxonomists in 1974, the extreme "splitting" practised by Dr. Oberholser, as manifested in the Texas book, is unacceptable.

On p. 1069 of "The bird life of Texas" appears a list of 35 subspecific names newly proposed in this book, plus a new genus and species of hummingbird based on a single specimen from the Chisos Mountains (which Kincaid remarks "perhaps represents a mutation or hybrid"). In addition to the names on this list, there are six generic names newly proposed in the text (by my count; these are not listed anywhere). These fig-

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ures are misleading, however, as Dr. Oberholser recognized dozens of subspecies and genera, some revived and some newly proposed, for which he found names available in the previous literature, and which, again, are manifestations of his taxonomic philosophy of extreme "splitting." A single example must suffice. Some taxonomists consider the Northern Jacana (*Jacana spinosa*) and the Wattled Jacana (*Jacana jacana*) to be conspecific, as intermediate specimens are known from Panamá. Oberholser considered the jacanas to represent not only two distinct species, but two *genera*; for *spinosa* he disinterred the generic name *Asarcia* Sharpe, 1890.

Dr. Oberholser was an inveterate student of the older ornithological literature, and an ultra-strict constructionist in the often difficult subject of legalistic nomenclature, especially as regards priority. "The bird life of Texas" contains many examples of his efforts to overthrow well-established scientific names in favor of older names exhumed by his bibliographic studies. Each of these cases must certainly be considered on its merits, and the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union (the "Check-list Committee") will have to do just that. Fortunately, however, most ornithologists agree fully with the spirit expressed by the quotation on the title page of the A.O.U. Check-list: "Zoölogical Nomenclature is a means, not an end, of Zoölogical Science." The International Code for Zoological Nomenclature states in the third paragraph of its Preamble that "Priority is the basic principle of zoological nomenclature." In the second paragraph, however, the object of the Code is given as the promotion of "stability and universality in the scientific names of animals, and to ensure that each name is unique and distinct. All its provisions are subservient to these ends . . ." Toward these ends, ample means are provided to prevent the upset of firmly established names because of minor technicalities or of the discovery of long-forgotten or long-rejected names.

I have analyzed more than thirty changes from presently accepted A.O.U. usage (other than those dealing only with genders of names), proposed by Oberholser in the Texas book for purely nomenclatorial, not taxonomic reasons. Some of these prove to have been based on demonstrable factual error; others on extremely dubious interpretations (some of these rejected in the past by earlier A.O.U. Check-list Committees); and still others on cases upon which the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature has already ruled in favor of preserving established usage. In some instances, Dr. Oberholser appears to have uncovered names that do indeed

jeopardize well-known scientific names if the Rule of Priority is followed to the letter. A provision in the International Code permits application to the Commission to retain presently used names, needing only the demonstration that substitution of the earlier name would upset well-established usage (construed as usage for fifty years or more), thus working against the much-desired stability of scientific nomenclature. After study of each of Oberholser's proposals, the A.O.U. Committee intends to submit the appropriate petition to the International Commission to avoid undesirable changes in established nomenclature.

The main purpose of the present note is to urge all writers who have occasion to use the scientific names of North American birds, but who are not themselves students of taxonomy and nomenclature, to ignore for the time being the names used in "The bird life of Texas" that differ from the usage of the A.O.U. Check-list. This is not to be considered as a blanket suppression of Dr. Oberholser's opinions. All of his taxonomic decisions are under review, and any of his newly separated or revived subspecies and genera that appear to the Committee to have validity will certainly be upheld, although it should be noted that such decisions must still be considered to some extent subjective (i.e., a mild "splitter" might favor retention of some of Oberholser's subdivisions, whereas even the mildest of "lumpers" would probably reject virtually all of them). Similarly, a few of Oberholser's name changes based on nomenclatorial technicalities might possibly survive restudy.

Most American ornithological journals require authors to follow the usage of the A.O.U. Check-list with respect to nomenclature unless a satisfactory reason is offered for doing otherwise (see, for example, "Suggestions to authors," inside back cover of *The Wilson Bulletin*). "A satisfactory reason" is generally construed as being based on the author's own research. Under the circumstances, a reference to "Oberholser (1974)" should not in itself be considered a sufficient explanation for departing from A.O.U. nomenclature. Editors of local journals that may not have a stated policy on scientific names are urged to watch for usage in manuscripts that conforms to Oberholser solely because the author is attempting to be "up-to-date."

I am indebted to Eugene Eisenmann for suggestions in connection with the preparation of this note. Its contents are acceptable to him in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, American Ornithologists' Union, but responsibility for the wording is mine and not that of the Committee