

The Blue List for 1976

by Robert Arbib



Burrowing Owl. Photo/Allan D. Cruickshank from N.A.S.

Once again, in the face of some misconceptions about what the Blue List represents, we repeat an earlier definition. This list is made up of those species which, in all or in significant part of their range, currently exhibit potentially dangerous, apparently non-cyclical population declines. It is not intended to supplement, or to compete with official lists of endangered or threatened species. It should be interpreted as an "early warning" list, and its central purpose is to encourage increased concern and interest in and reporting on the species listed. Some of the species finding their way onto the list *may still be locally or regionally abundant*, but are included because there is enough evidence that in other regions the species are indeed declining.

There is no cut-off population point, above which any species may be automatically removed from the list. The Western Grebe may appear in the thousands in winter on Lake Mead, Nev. but elsewhere as a breeding bird in western regions, it is apparently on a downhill track. Critics have held that it is ridiculous to include such abundant, widespread species as Common Nighthawk, Hairy Woodpecker, and Yellow Warbler. How then do we indicate that in significant areas of North America, observers are unanimous that

these species are in significant declines? We were advised to quietly drop Canvasback, because various governmental agencies were carefully monitoring the population of this gamebird and making efforts to manipulate its abundance. But if we omit declining species merely because someone is studying them, our list becomes inaccurate and incomplete. Most species on the list, of course, are nongame birds, and contributors to the Blue List (and all birders) are monitoring these far more closely than any governmental agency.

This year, we have had the biggest response ever to our questionnaire; it comes from *American Birds'* regional editors and subeditors, from expert field observers, and these responses reflect, in many cases, the consensus of large numbers of field observers who contribute regularly to *American Birds*. Far from representing merely the random impressions of random observers, the distilled opinions herewith presented result, then, from the combined and weighed observations of hundreds, if not thousands, of birders in the field tens of thousands of times in 1975. We question whether there are more informed analyses of the status of these species anywhere.

One species has been deleted this year and five added. Several species, such as Gray Hawk and Rose-throated Becard, which barely reach the United States at the northern limits of their ranges, were nominated but they do not truly represent Blue List species within the current definition, even though their tenure in the southwestern states is tenuous.

THE BLUE LIST

- 1. Red-throated Loon.** Retained on the basis of a status that is apparently unchanged from that of recent years. Observers on both coasts see no diminished numbers, but opinions in mid-continent are almost unanimous in reporting declines. "Steady decline in observable abundance in the last two decades"—Andrle.
- 2. Red-necked Grebe.** This year sees a more definite consensus. The species, in the opinion of most field observers reporting, within its range, is on a long, slow decline. Apparently never abundant, the status of the species is now troubling observers from the Hudson-Delaware Region, through Ontario, the Niagara-Champlain, Western Great Lakes, Middle Prairie region, to the Mid-Pacific. There are, however, a few dissenting voices in these same regions.
- 3. Western Grebe.** It may be difficult to understand inclusion of a species which winters in such enormous numbers as this one does at Lake Mead, Nev., but keen-eyed reporters from along the Pacific Coast, the Northern Great Plains, and in Colorado, note declining numbers. Elsewhere, especially in the Southwest, and in Utah, no problem is seen.
- 4. White Pelican.** Declining populations for this species are noted from the Mountain West, Middle Pacific Coast, Southern Texas, the Great Plains regions, and the Southwest: There is however, a minority of dissenting voices, from some of these same regions. A problem species: one on which we should have more nesting success data.
- 5. Double-crested Cormorant.** One of the more controversial species on the Blue List. Last year opinions were divided 59 to 41 per cent for deletion; this year with a much larger response it is 55 to 45 per cent in favor of retention. It is difficult in the returns to see specific trends. All reports from the Middlewestern Prairie Region—from Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky and Missouri noted declines, as did Ontario, Minnesota, Kansas, and the Pacific Coast.

Opinions were divided in the Mountain West and the Southwest. The Atlantic coast regions generally noted no declines. Freshwater cormorants should be suffering the same pesticide problems as the Osprey and Bald Eagle. Marine populations should be less affected.

- 6. Reddish Egret.** Status unchanged. Florida, Central Southern and Texas reporters all agree that this never-abundant species should continue to be watched. In the Southwest, where it is a straggler, "there are no factual data on these post-breeding wanderers from Mexico to indicate whether to keep or delete them,"—R. Witzeman.
- 7. Black-crowned Night Heron.** There is still disagreement as to the status of this species, although this year the balance has tipped in favor of retention by 57 to 43 per cent. Disagreement may be based more on regional verities than differences in observer interpretation. The eastern states seem to predominate in those who find no problems with the species but from Québec and Ontario through middle North America to the West Coast, and south to South Texas, the heron is believed to be declining. "A species whose habitat is in jeopardy in Arizona," R. Witzeman.
- 8. American Bittern.** Provisionally added to the list on the recommendation of field observations in the Mountain West (eleven reporters recommend), the Niagara-Champlain Region, the Hudson-Delaware Region, Utah (Bear River), Illinois, and the Southwest. It would be helpful if some meaningful observational statistics were supplied. Several comments were in the vein of D. Kibbe "may be in trouble in the region, but it is too early to say for sure." This is precisely the time when monitoring should begin.
- 9. Wood Stork.** In spite of an excellent 1975 breeding season in Florida (*Am. Birds* 29:961), most reporters feel that the species should be retained on the Blue List.
- 10. White-faced Ibis.** There is overwhelming agreement (84% of reporters) that this species should remain on the Blue List. In the four states of the Mountain West, for example, 18 of 20 observers with definite views favored retention, as did observers on the Pacific Coast and in Texas. The only dissent comes from a minority in the Southwest.
- 11. White Ibis.** A candidate for early removal from the list, although several qualified reporters in Florida and Texas consider its re-

- tention advisable. Tentatively retained; more information on breeding success required.
12. **Fulvous Tree Duck.** The changing status of this species, even in the last three years, is cause for speculation. In 1973 it was considered "a candidate for early removal from the list;" in 1974 it "picked up more support for retention from West Coast, Southwest, and Central Southern areas." This year reporters within its normal range are unanimous that it should be Blue-Listed. Has there been a sudden, drastic decline?
 13. **Canvasback.** Sixty-two per cent of a large cross-section of observers recommend Blue-Listing. The species is being carefully monitored by wildlife professionals, whose estimates are undoubtedly more accurate than ours. But we cannot drop a species obviously belonging on the list merely because its status is now recognized by officialdom. If and when the managing agencies succeed in restoring the species to health, it will happily vanish from our list.
 14. **Sharp-shinned Hawk.** There is wide divergence of opinion regarding the well being of this species, and much comment. No less than 64 of our far-flung fact-gatherers favor continued Blue-Listing of the species, which is enough for retention. See last year's comment, which still applies.
 15. **Cooper's Hawk.** This species received the highest total of votes for inclusion on the list of any species except Osprey, and one of the highest percentages (85%). In the Mountain West, the ratio is 88% to 12%, and in the Rocky-Mountain Intermountain it is 93% to 7%. Nonetheless, there are areas of disagreement (Southwest, California) where the middle Accipiter evidences no problem.
 16. **Red-shouldered Hawk.** No question of its retention, by about the same margin of opinion as before, with 80% of respondents in agreement. Richards (*Cassinia* 55:33, 1947-5) writing of southeastern Pennsylvania, calls it *endangered* in this area, with no nests reported since 1952. The Florida race (*extimus*) is an exception to the decline, as is the California population (*elegans*).
 17. **Swainson's Hawk.** Can be taken verbatim from the 1974 listing: "All western regions see serious declines, while the Midwest and prairie regions see no cause for alarm." In favor of listing overall: 75%.
 18. **Ferruginous Hawk.** "Threatened in southern Idaho, holding its own in east-central Wyoming, declining in Utah, disputed as to status in the Southwest, (Witzemans no, Zimmerman yes, Hubbard and Kauffman no). The consensus, by a considerable margin, is that the species remain on the list, or even be included in the official "Threatened Species" list.
 19. **Harris' Hawk.** There is almost unanimous opinion that the Harris' Hawk belongs on the early warning list. One dissenting opinion comes from Frances Williams in the Southern Great Plains.
 20. **Marsh Hawk.** Sixty-eight reporters (68%) favor retention of the Marsh Hawk on this year's list. The sentiment is widespread, with opposing viewpoints coming from Utah, Kansas, the Dakotas, the mountain states, and the Southwest, the latter two areas being rather evenly divided pro and con. One view is relayed by Hugh Kingery, "most people favored keeping all birds of prey on the list...because of the concern over target shooting." The sentiment may be valid, but it is not helpful in arriving at meaningful evaluations.
 21. **Osprey.** Although there are signs here and there that the Osprey may be at least holding its own in scattered centers of breeding, 88% of all respondents gave it the strongest support received by any species for inclusion on the list.
 22. **Caracara.** Almost unanimous opinion that the Caracara should continue on the Blue List.
 23. **Prairie Falcon.** With almost 90% of those expressing an opinion about the status of the Prairie Falcon favoring continued listing, there seems no doubt about the status of the species.
 24. **Merlin.** In spite of reports of an exceptional coastal (New York) fall flight, and evidence at hawkwatch lookouts seeming to indicate at least a stable eastern population, over 91% of all respondents consider the Merlin to fully merit Blue List status. These views are continent-wide.
 25. **American Kestrel.** Last year, with a much smaller electorate, retention received 45% of the support; this year, with a far wider survey, support for retention drops to 40%. In large sections of the continent, obviously, the kestrel is in no trouble; of most concern is the Florida-breeding subspecies *paulus*.
 26. **Sage Grouse.** No change in status. Approximately 72% of all those expressing viewpoints favored retention. Scott (Wyoming) comments "varies so much by season and whether there is proper habitat that an overall trend is hard to calculate." Cobb, of Colorado: "these... birds have large populations

in select areas but should be watched as their breeding requirements are somewhat specialized.”

27. **Mountain Quail.** Retained on the basis of a not-very-representative consensus, with adverse conditions most evidence in the Northern Rocky-Intermountain Region.
28. **King Rail.** A new addition to the list, on the basis of recommendations from the Hudson-Delaware, Western Great Lakes, and Middlewestern Prairie Regions. Richards (*Cassinia* 55: 33, 1974-5) considers it “endangered in s.e. Pennsylvania; no nests reported since 1960.” Loss of habitat is obviously an important factor everywhere.
29. **American Oystercatcher.** Support for the inclusion of this species dropped somewhat this year, with evidence of actual increases in the (small) northeastern population. But elsewhere there is concern for this species, nowhere abundant, because of its restricted, specialized, vulnerable breeding habitat.
30. **Piping Plover.** If increased support for retention of this species is a bad sign, the Piping Plover could be in trouble. In the last three years, the consensus for inclusion has grown from 69% to 83% to 87%. Habitat vulnerability continues to be the problem.
31. **Snowy Plover.** Twenty-nine respondents favor retention on the list; the Southwest and Southern Pacific regions continue to dissent.
32. **Upland Sandpiper.** Continued on the list. Although its name was inadvertently omitted from the circulated questionnaire, it was a frequent “write-in”. In the Mountain West Region, for example, there were 14 retention opinions against a single deletion viewpoint.
33. **Gull-billed Tern.** Almost unanimously believed to merit Blue Listing. Armistead and Cutler (Pennsylvania) and Stevenson (Florida) are in disagreement.
34. **Least Tern.** Retained, with 80% of respondents favoring. Buckley (Hudson-Delaware) summarizes the status for many shoreline nesters when he says “[Such species] as terns and skimmers are being reduced to fewer and fewer *sites*—a dangerous situation, even though numbers might be holding *in toto*.”
35. **Ancient Murrelet.** Status unknown. One vote for retention from Rich Stallcup (Middle Pacific Region), no other comment. Much more data must be forthcoming before a definitive evaluation can be determined. As of the moment, a candidate for deletion.
36. **Yellow-billed Cuckoo.** A wide diversity of opinion prevails concerning the status of this species, with the retention sentiment prevailing by a mere 57% - 43% margin. This is a complete turnabout from the previous year when deletion was favored by 83%; this year no less than 14 regions discerned declining populations. Kingery (Mountain West), while approving retention, asks “I wonder how much the difficulty of detection [of the breeding birds] affects this?”
37. **Barn Owl.** The 28 respondents who considered Barn Owl a true Blue List bird last year has grown to 71. The areas in which an opposing viewpoint was noted included New Jersey, Florida, the southwestern states, and the West Coast.
38. **Burrowing Owl.** Status unchanged, although this year shows an increase in the percentage of those favoring listing, to 75% of a much wider base. The only areas with recommendations to delete the species were scattered, Florida, one of six, Texas, one of three, the Southwest, two of four and South Dakota, one. In the Mountain West and Northern Rockies area, the pro-retention ratio was 33-5.
39. **Short-eared Owl.** Added to the list on the basis of recommendations from the Hudson-Delaware, Western Great Lakes (Minnesota, four) Mountain West (fourteen) regions. No comments accompanied any of these recommendations; the population decline may be more widespread than indicated here.
40. **Common Nighthawk.** With 78% of the electorate witnessing no decline in populations, it might be argued that the species should be deleted. But in the Northeast, in Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Northern Rockies, and Oregon, the opposing viewpoint prevailed, enough to warrant a year’s extension on this controversial species.
41. **Red-headed Woodpecker.** Added to the list with some misgivings, but this species was nominated for inclusion in four regions, including the Hudson-Delaware, Florida, the Middlewestern Prairie and the Southwest. More data are needed.
42. **Lewis’ Woodpecker.** Opinions are somewhat divided, with 60% favoring retention on the list. The Mountain West Region seems to be a special focus of decline.
43. **Hairy Woodpecker.** Overall sentiment is against Blue-Listing a species as widespread and apparently common as the Hairy Woodpecker, but we do have 33% of all those who commented, in favor of continued listing

There is no regional pattern to the returns, except that Floridians are unanimous in listing. All others in favor of retention were also east of the Rockies.

44. **Cliff Swallow.** Tentatively added to the list on the basis of declines detected in the well-covered Hudson-Delaware, Mid-Atlantic Coast, and Appalachian Regions. Elsewhere there were no mentions, except that Kingery registered strong opposition from the viewpoint of the Mountain West Region, where the species is "widespread and common."
45. **Purple Martin.** Two to one in favor of deletion, but there are enough regional questions about this species to keep it on the list this year. Blue List status for this species should probably be confined to the two coasts.
46. **Bewick's Wren.** Two-thirds of all respondents favor retention on the list, almost exactly the same ratio as last year. But the division in this instance is entirely geographical, with all regions from Minnesota and Kansas eastward favoring retention, and others (except for Mountain West, which is divided) favoring deletion. Rarely do we get such a clear-cut picture.
47. **Florida Scrub Jay.** No new information. Retained.
48. **Mountain Bluebird.** Exactly twice as many observers favor deletion as favor retention, but the retention element is strong in some parts of the West, especially the Northwest, in the Rocky Mountain-Intermountain Regions and Nevada.
49. **Loggerhead Shrike.** This is another species about which there is a wide divergence of opinion, with a 60-40 ratio of "retains" to "deletes." Declines are noted throughout the continent east of the Great Plains, except for Florida and Alabama, and in the mountain states. Texas, the Southwest, and the West Coast report no problems.
50. **Bell's Vireo.** There is increasing sentiment to delist this species, although those in favor of listing are still in a sizable majority. But the vast majority of those consulted expressed no opinion about the species, indicating a dearth of knowledge, a situation that should be remedied.
51. **Yellow Warbler.** Some respondents commented with some vehemence that this species, still abundant through most of its range, should be deleted, and that its inclusion cast doubts on the credibility of the entire list. How then do we explain away the 29% of those returning opinions favor this species' retention on the list? Its status is

obviously quite diverse from region to region.

52. **Yellow-breasted Chat.** Tentatively added to the list on the strength of recommendations from the Hudson-Delaware, Midwestern Prairie (four respondents) and the Rocky Mountain Intermountain regions. More data are needed.
53. **Lesser Goldfinch.** A minority of those reporting viewed this as a Blue List species, but in the Mountain West Region eight of twelve respondents indicated declining status for the species. Tentatively retained, with strong reservations.
54. **Grasshopper Sparrow.** Supported for Blue List inclusion by 68% of those reporting "Most grassland species are going, as habitat goes," —Buckley. "Formerly common, now local and uncommon," —Richards —s.e. Pennsylvania.
55. **Henslow's Sparrow.** Almost unanimous sentiment in favor of Blue List inclusion for this meadowland species, and for the same reasons as for Grasshopper Sparrow Richards calls it "endangered" for s e Pennsylvania.
56. **Bachman's Sparrow.** With a far bigger representation than in previous years, this sparrow remains on the list with 80% of the respondents favoring retention. Dissenting views come only from Ogden, Baker, and Kingsbury in Florida, and Williams in the Southern Great Plains.

The species deleted from the list this year is Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, about which there are little if any comparative data.

Future candidates for the Blue List, with initials of the Regions from which nominations were received. All these species should be carefully monitored so that valid judgments may be made in forthcoming lists.

Pied-billed Grebe (MWP, H-D); Gannet (Q), Great Blue Heron (N-C); Green Heron (NPC), Little Blue Heron (H-D, F); Snowy Egret (F), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (MWP); Least Bittern (H-D); Black Duck (N-C); Redhead (N-C), Turkey Vulture (SAC); Black Vulture (SAC, ST), Mississippi Kite (MPR, SW); Goshawk (SW), Broad-winged Hawk (H-D); Zone-tailed Hawk (SW); Short-tailed Hawk (F); Black Hawk (SW), Aplomado Falcon (SW); White-tailed Ptarmigan (SW); Greater Prairie Chicken (MW); Sharp-tailed Grouse (MW); Bobwhite (MWP); Chukar (MWP); Yellow Rail (MWP); Black Rail (SW), Mountain Plover (MW, SW); Spotted Sandpiper (H-D, App); Solitary Sandpiper (F); Long-billed

Curlew (SW, MW), Common Tern (F), Caspian Tern (RMI); Mourning Dove (RMI); Ground Dove (SW); Black-billed Cuckoo (MWP); Screech Owl (MWP); Great Horned Owl (ST); Barred Owl (H-D); Spotted Owl (NPC); Whip-poor-will (H-D, App); Ruby-throated Hummingbird (N-C, MWP); Belted Kingfisher (MWP, RMI); Red-bellied Woodpecker (ST); Gila Woodpecker (SW); Ladder-backed Woodpecker (ST), White-headed Woodpecker (RMI); Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker (RMI); E. Kingbird (RMI); Western Kingbird (RMI); Ash-throated Flycatcher (RMI, MPC); E. Phoebe (SW); Dusky Flycatcher (RMI); White-necked Raven (MW); Tufted Titmouse (MWP); Brown Creeper (F); House Wren (H-D); Short-billed Marsh Wren (H-D, N-C); Gray Catbird (RMI); Long-billed Thrasher (ST); Curve-billed Thrasher (ST), Veery (RMI); E. Bluebird (H-D, MWP); W Bluebird (RMI, MW, NPC); White-eyed Vireo (H-D); Gray Vireo (SW, SPC); Yellow-throated Vireo (H-D, N-C); Red-eyed Vireo (RMI); Orchard Oriole (MWP); Hooded Oriole (ST), Bobolink (H-D); Summer Tanager (ST); Pyrrhuloxia (ST); Painted Bunting (SW); Purple Finch (H-D); Cassin's Finch (RMI); Pine Grosbeak (SW); Lark Bunting (MWP); Baird's Sparrow (SW); Vesper Sparrow (H-D, N-C); Fox Sparrow (RMI); McCown's Longspur (SW).

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“SUTTON’S” WARBLER CORRIGENDUM

The report of a Sutton's Warbler in West Virginia published in *American Birds* 29: 817 (1975) is apparently in error. Examination of photographs of this bird by several ornithologists leaves no doubt that morphologically the bird was a Yellow-throated Warbler and only superficially bore resemblance to Sutton's Warbler. However the vocalization of this bird, and the results of certain song-playback experiments involving it lead to some interesting specula-

tions about hybridization between Parula and Yellow-throated Warblers. This information is to be published elsewhere.

The editor regrets publication of the note; it was rushed into print as being of great interest, under the impression that the author himself had been one of the original observers and was reporting for the group. The cited fact that 60 observers, including “super-experts”, had apparently agreed on the identification of the bird *in hand* seemed to bestow on it a credibility obviously unwarranted.