

The A. B. A. Checklist, a review

*“a long-sought, useful, and commendable effort
... one that will serves its primary function well”*

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The literature of avian nomenclature was enriched with the publication in late 1975, of the A B.A. Checklist: Birds of Continental United States and Canada. The long-awaited checklist was prepared by a committee of the American Birding Association, chaired by Chandler S. Robbins. The checklist is organized into four functional parts: the introductory text, map, and table of contents; a checklist of species giving vernacular and scientific names, complete with boxes for ticking off species; a summary of records of accidentals, and an index which also summarizes recent changes in vernacular names. Ten pages are left blank for notes and future annual supplements. The text is laid out clearly and typographical errors are almost absent. Printed lines to the right of each species name justify the right margin of each page but seem to serve no other purpose. Blank lines to inscribe dates and localities for a birder's first records or other notes would have been more useful, although the format is so spacious that this easily can be done.

A 64 (+viii)-page publication (including those ten blank pages) must necessarily treat an 800+ species avifauna briefly. The most disappointing aspect of the checklist is the summary of records of accidentals (species recorded less than ten times in this century from North America). This section loses much value because of its brevity and its numerous omissions. Although I found only one species on the list of which I was previously

unaware, I was surprised to learn that since 1900 there have been more than ten records for Red-footed Booby, Falcated Teal, Smew and White-winged Black Tern. On the other hand, there are more than ten records for the Thick-billed Parrot, which is included in the accidental list. The citation for Bahama Swallow, which notes only one circumstantial possibility of nesting, seems out of context in a comprehensive list of records and is uninformative in its brevity.

The recent British Checklist established a useful status category for species known only from 'ancient' (none in the last fifty years) records. By the same criterion, in North America such a list would include all extinct species, and additionally King Vulture, Roadside Hawk, White-tailed Eagle, Eurasian Curlew, Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Thick-billed Parrot, Bumblebee Hummingbird, Cuban, Southern, and Gray-breasted Martins, Black Catbird, Ochre Oriole and Worthen's Sparrow.

The A.B.A. long ago decided to exclude Greenland, Baja California and Bermuda from its area. The exclusion of the first two areas can be defended on faunistic grounds and the first by its inaccessibility, but Bermuda is both accessible and has a North American avifauna. I believe it should have been included. As far as I can deter-

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mine, inclusion of Bermuda would have added only six or seven "species" to the list: Cahow, West Indian Tree Duck, White Tern, Large-billed Tern, Snowy-bellied Martin, European Goldfinch and Canary. The systematic status of two of these taxa is debatable: Large-billed Tern may already have occurred in the A.B.A. area, and only the Cahow and the two fringillids represent breeding species unlikely to be found elsewhere in North America.

The changes in vernacular names are for the most part satisfactory. The use of Little Tern for *Sterna albifrons* is not indexed. *Parus cinctus* might better have become Siberian Tit. I have mixed feelings as to whether Northern Junco is an improvement over the more descriptive Dark-eyed Junco for *Junco hyemalis*, both on taxonomic and geographical grounds. Spotted Oriole for *Icterus pectoralis* is an abomination; Spot-breasted Oriole is much more descriptive. Contrarily, the more pronounceable Galapagos Storm-Petrel might better have been designated the tongue-twisting Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel, since many populations, including that from which the North American specimen came, do not nest in the Galapagos Islands; incidentally, I doubt that either the latter or Band-rumped Storm-Petrel will long survive as vernaculars.

The A.B.A. Checklist Committee decision was explicitly to follow A.O.U. taxonomy. By this standard, South Polar Skua should not have been recognized as a species, since thus far it has been clearly but implicitly included in *Catharacta skua* by the A.O.U., and the A.O.U. has not yet officially abandoned the genus *Mergellus* for the Smew. The Stolid Flycatcher also represents an implicit but more conservative decision, since W E Lanyon has argued that the taxon involved should be called *Myiarchus sagrae* (which awaits a vernacular name). The sequence in the list of some of the new additions (e.g., Thick-billed Vireo) is systematically naive. Any checklist that does not follow the Johnsgard-Delacour-Mayr sequence for waterfowl or the Brown-Amadon sequence for raptors is likely to be dated upon publication. I am sad to report the A.B.A. has produced such a list.

I was surprised, but not unduly disturbed, to find Cape Petrel, Black-tailed Shearwater, Cook's Petrel, Black-bellied (?=White-bellied) Storm-Petrel, Common Shelduck, Ruddy Shelduck, Baer's Pochard, Scarlet Ibis, King Vulture, Black-tailed Gull, Trudeau's Tern, Large-billed Tern, Reiffer's (Rufous-tailed) Hummingbird, Golden-crowned Warbler, and Worthen's Sparrow missing from the list without comment, since all are listed from the A.B.A. Checklist area by the A.O.U. The A.B.A. committee seems to have

missed substantiated records of ten species which appear to be firm additions to the North American avifauna: Jabiru, Roadside Hawk, Great Snipe, Southern Martin, Dusky Thrush (the published sight record is supported by photographs, *vide* W.R. Spofford), Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), Black Catbird, Ochre Oriole, Crimson-collared Grosbeak and Pallas' Reed Bunting. A recent report of Little Bunting is correctly excluded because the specimen was taken aboard ship 150 miles north of Alaska in the Chukchi Sea and beyond the limits for records of "pelajics." About 30 other species, excluding exotic waterfowl, gamebirds, parrots and finches, have also been reported from North America with less satisfactory details, but some of these (e.g., Yellow Grosbeaks) would certainly be valid additions. Introduced species are included in the list if they have bred unaided by man for at least ten years. Rose-ringed Parakeet in North Miami; and Peafowl and Yellow-headed Parrot in Los Angeles seem to meet this criterion but are excluded. The status of Budgerigar and Blue-gray Tanager in south Florida both deserve review somewhere in the literature, and accounts in *American Birds* suggest that Canary-winged Parakeet and Indian Hill Myna are already firmly established members of the south Florida avian menagerie. Even though some of these omissions are treated in the 1975 Supplement to the A.B.A. Checklist (*Birding* 7:355), the absence of any comments on excluded species is a serious deficiency.

The decision to follow A.O.U. taxonomy produces one other serious deficiency in the A.B.A. Checklist. The A.O.U. Checklist is intended to provide a uniform and "official" taxonomy for the North American avifauna for papers that do not deal with systematics of North American birds. The A.B.A. Checklist was motivated to provide a uniform list of forms to count in the sport of birding. Once the decision to count only forms at some *taxonomic* level (species) was made, preparation of the A.B.A. Checklist assumes an aspect of a taxonomic paper and should in no way be restricted by the A.O.U. classification. To many birders it does not really matter what the exact name or list sequence of species is. The critical question is: is it a species and therefore countable? The A.B.A. Committee, by adopting the A.O.U. classification, has avoided this task, and I, for one, am disappointed in this. I had hoped they might produce a *better* checklist than the A.O.U.'s.

I strongly support the A.B.A.'s decision to count only species. Once we try to count *some* morphs of polymorphic species, or *some* races of polytypic species, we are immediately open to a complaint why don't we count *all* morphs of *all* polymorphic

species, or all (recognizable) subspecies, or, carrying things to the logical conclusion, all recognizable age and sex variations of species? While such a list would put many of us over the 700 mark, I doubt that this is the way any birder really wants to attain that goal. Further, in many cases it is by no means clear that some described subspecies or polymorphisms actually exist, since much of the older (and some more recent) taxonomic literature does not meet modern scientific standards of documentation. Species are counted because they seem less arbitrary. If that is the case, why do ornithologists keep changing their minds as to what is or is not a species?

One reason is that different species evolve from common ancestors. Because such evolution is ongoing, there is no sharp boundary that *invariably* permits one to make that distinction. In any large avifauna we can expect to find the whole range of variation from strongly distinct species (e.g., North American vultures) through groups of species that almost never hybridize (tyrannid flycatchers); groups where hybridization is recurrent but rare (the *Junco/Zonotrichia/Melospiza* group of sparrows) to infrequent (Mallard/Pintail/Gadwall); borderline cases where hybridization is frequent (Indigo-Lazuli Bunting; Audubon's-Myrtle Warbler) or in which extensive intergradation occurs (Red- and Yellow-shafted Flickers, Song Sparrow subspecies); and finally ends with forms that show only clinal variation (Common Loon) or almost no geographic variation at all (Brewer's Blackbird). At some point in this continuum an arbitrary decision has to be made as to when we are dealing with one or with two species. One whose definition is genetically (or phenetically) conservative would draw the line at the level where hybridization is at most infrequent, while a more liberal definition draws the line somewhere between frequent hybridization and extensive intergradation. Either definition is justifiable, but once a decision as to what does or does not constitute a species is made, all the classifications that follow should be consistent. The present A.O.U. classification is not, no doubt because the A O U. committee is not unanimous as to what criteria to use. While I doubt that the A.B.A. membership would welcome adoption of a conservative definition by the A.B.A. Checklist Committee, I urge it to adopt, and to make its checklist consistent with some explicit criteria.

The other, and perhaps more important, reason your life list is subject to future change is because knowledge of birds itself is ever increasing. Distinctions once thought to be important, such as wing and facial patterns in Common Flickers, are found not to separate species, while other seemingly minor variations, such as eye color in Thayer's/Herring/Iceland Gull, are found to be of great significance. The best birders I have met are often acutely aware of such distinctions, and constitute a valuable store of unused information. As professional ornithologists recognize and utilize this resource, acquired as a result of birding at its best, the prospect that birders can make an impact on the A.O.U.'s classification becomes closer to reality.

Avian systematics is a remarkably active part of American ornithology. Such activity can only result in continually changing concepts of the species composition of the North American avifauna. There is no hope of seeing a final checklist. It will be as interesting to observe the response of the A.B.A. Committee to this activity as it is to follow the A.O.U.'s. Be forewarned: there are more under-lumped than under-split species of birds in North America. As for me, I will always find it hard to believe Antillean and Booming Nighthawks are one species after seeing them display together at Key West; Brown-throated Wren will never be more than one of those scruffy brown birds you need to find to complete an entire column in some checklist; and I will still enjoy picking Blue Geese out from Snows as a morph as much as I did when it was a "species".

Finally, it is recognized that the A.B.A. Checklist provides a long-sought, convenient, and comprehensive checklist of North American birds to both members of the A.B.A. and others (including authors of popular bird books) who desire a resume of this diverse avifauna. In spite of the criticism detailed above, it is a useful and commendable effort; one that will not only serve its primary function well (and increasingly as it is revised). It cannot help but prompt and perhaps even influence some needed decisions on the part of the A.O.U. Committee on Nomenclature.

Available from A.B.A. Inc., P.O. Box 4335, Austin, TX 78765. \$3.50.