

On A. O. U. Check-list species and former species

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Although the A.O.U. Check-list Supplement 32 (*Auk* 90:411-419, 1973) has elicited much comment and debate, relatively few of the changes came as a surprise to many bird watchers and ornithologists. For a generation of birders that accepted the merging of Bronzed and Purple Grackles with some relief, many of the changes will cause little trouble or regret. For more than a decade the status of the Great White Heron, Blue Goose, Green-winged Teal, etc., have been debated, and it was only a question of time before their "species" status was corrected. Short (*Calif. Brds* 1:143-145, 1970) who personally investigated some of the species problems involved in the name-changes (e.g., flickers and orioles) has already pointed out that birders are not bound to confine their attention to nominal species but can legitimately pay attention to recognizable forms. The A.O.U. Check-list names reflect our current understanding of the biological species status of North American birds. There is no reason to ignore the status of unnamed populations or of subspecies that were formerly species. In the field a biologist studies a local population of birds, and although it is important to know the species-status of that population, it is the population that is of interest to the student. Similarly the birder or lister can count recognizable forms regardless of their species status, if so desired. Listing, after all, is a completely personal thing.

For example, although the Dusky and Cape Sable Seaside Sparrows are now treated simply as Seaside Sparrows (which most observers have suspected they were), their clear cut morphological features indicate that they are genetically distinct from other populations of the same species. As such they continue to be of interest, particularly since their populations are endangered. The Great White Heron (morph that it may be) needs to be studied both in Florida and the West Indies to determine how it interacts with the Great Blue Heron in mixed breeding colonies. *American Birds* plays a key role in disseminating informa-

tion on the status of such populations, regardless of their species status. The Check-list Committee's decisions on these birds reflect current beliefs based on available biological knowledge of the birds and should not be taken as implying that no further biological information on these "former species" is required. The role of *American Brds* would be compromised if information on the Great White Heron stopped appearing or was buried under Great Blue Heron.

Arbib (*Amer. Birds* 27:576-577, 1973) has clearly stated the problem and demonstrated some of the awkward compound names that are likely to be developed. I would like to suggest that instead of adding new and confusing names to our already overburdened literature, the same familiar names be used, either in quotation marks or without capital letters. "Great White Heron" seems to me preferable to such designations as Great Blue (White) Heron or Great Blue Heron-white morph. I think that Dusky Seaside Sparrow will be no more confusing than Seaside Sparrow (dusky race), but perhaps appropriate designations will have to be worked out individually for each form to minimize confusion. Moreover, foreign readers, lacking first hand familiarity with our nomenclatorial revolution, may be forever confused if a species that interested them were to suddenly disappear from *American Birds*. I may be accused of trying to resurrect the old-time practice of using distinct common names for subspecies of birds — a practice which was laid to rest over a period of many years. However, I think in the present circumstances the practice of retaining designations for "former species" is justified.

The main response of birders to the Check-list Supplement seems to be discouragement over the number of species lost from lists. This seems inappropriate since the committee's decisions con-

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cerned the biological status of certain forms, not their "lability." Moreover, it is important to note that taxonomic decisions are not all one way, (e.g., Thayer's Gull, Great-tailed Grackle). It is also quite possible that some of today's changes may even be reversed in the future as more information is accumulated. I, for one, would not be surprised to find the Great White Heron eventually again treated as a species.

Although the actual means of designating the "former species" in print is an editorial decision, the main purpose of this is to encourage birders to continue reporting the status of these forms. They have not ceased to exist nor have they lost their biological interest. They have not lost their voices,

nor their beauty, nor their unique field marks. They have not ceased to worry conservationists.

The editors of American Birds find Dark-eyed (Slate-colored) Junco and Northern (Bullock's) Oriole and other such designations as awkward as everyone else. Recently we have begun to simplify our usage, reverting to former species names, in quotes, the quotation marks signifying that the authors and editors are knowingly referring to a race and not a species, and trusting that the reader will make this assumption. Regional Editors and all authors are asked to follow this practice in the future. Henceforth it will be "Great White" Heron and "Ipswich" Sparrow in these pages, except for Christmas Bird Count reports.

A Great-tailed Grackle from Illinois

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On October 5, 1974, William O'Brien, Robert Adams, and Robert Randall found a Great-tailed Grackle (*Cassidix mexicanus*) at a sewage disposal plant on the north side of Jacksonville, Morgan County, Illinois. There are no other records for this species in Illinois (see Randall, *Illinois Audubon Bulletin* 172:3, Spring 1975). On October 7 the bird was still present, and was collected (Illinois State Museum #605929). The bird proved to be a female with ovary measuring 9 mm x 5.5 mm and the skull was fully ossified. There was little fat and the gizzard contained mostly short-horned grasshoppers (Acrididae, *Melanoplus* spp.) and two giant ragweed seeds (*Ambrosia trifida*). The eye was light yellow (nearest to Baryta Yellow of Ridgway's colors), and the bill and tarsi were black. The measurements were: wing 143 mm, tail 136 mm, exposed culmen 28.8 mm, tarsi 39.8 mm, weight 111.1 g.

The species was undoubtedly *Cassidix mexicanus*, but the subspecific determination was difficult. Therefore, three experts examined the specimen: Robert W. Dickerman, Cornell University Medical College; George H. Lowery, Jr., Louisiana State University; and John S. Weske, National Museum.

The nominate race *C.m. mexicanus* is larger and darker than *C.m. prosopidicola*, therefore, dif-

ferences arose because the bird had the coloration of *C.m. mexicanus* but was more the size and proportions of *C.m. prosopidicola*. The grackle was in fresh fall plumage with the outermost primaries still in molt. Since nearly full growth of the primaries was accomplished, the wing length would be at least 10 mm below the smallest *C.m. mexicanus*. The dorsal colorations in the adult (this bird was fully adult) *C.m. prosopidicola* is darker and more glossy than in immatures; this in combination with the fresh plumage would account for the coloration approaching *C.m. mexicanus*. Therefore, the bird was identified as *C.m. prosopidicola*.

The race *C.m. prosopidicola* is normally found in southern New Mexico, western, south-central and east-central Texas, south to southern Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and southern Tamaulipas and in winter to Louisiana (A.O.U. Checklist, 1957)

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