BOOK REVIEW

The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds, 7th Edition. Am. Ornithol. Union, Washington, D.C. 1998. Hardback. Price $49.95 (plus $4.00 domestic, $10.50 Canada, and $7.00 other foreign, shipping and handling). ISBN 1-891276-00-X. Available from Max C. Thompson, assistant to the treasurer, Dept. of Biology, Southwestern College, 100 College Street, Winfield, KS 67156.

The passing of a generation can be marked by the appearance of a new *Check-list of North American Birds* from the American Ornithologists' Union. With each edition this venerable standard of taxonomy and nomenclature for birds on the North American continent becomes entrenched in the next several decades of publications, ranging from the technical literature to our favorite field guides. In this regard there are few, if any, publications in ornithology that have a greater impact on the field.

The sheer magnitude of this effort makes it difficult to draw comparisons with other work. Indeed, it seems comparable only with past editions of itself (especially, of course, A.O.U. 1983) and with such tomes as Sibley and Monroe (1990). The 7th edition is as successful as either in that it distills a staggering amount of information into something that is readily usable and even readable. For those unfamiliar with previous editions, the *Check-list* summarizes the distribution of all species recorded from North America, south to Panama and including the Caribbean and the Hawaiian Islands, i.e., a combined biogeographical and political area. Each account includes the scientific and English name of a species, the citation for its original description, a summary of its habitat, and a fairly lengthy account of its distribution, broken into breeding and winter ranges when relevant. An optional "Notes" section may discuss taxonomic matters. The 7th edition now includes a list of French names for all species but no Spanish names.

With but a single exception we find the 7th edition superior to its predecessor. Most importantly, the *Check-list* now includes a long overdue, reasonably comprehensive list of pertinent literature supporting taxonomic decisions and significant geographical records. Still, we were surprised that several important topical papers were omitted, e.g., the evidence for paraphyly of the Pelecaniformes by Hedges and Sibley (1994). The one exception concerns the hypothetical list, now consolidated into the sole appendix, comprising two parts: species reported with evidence insufficient for inclusion on the main list, and forms of doubtful status or hybrid origin. All references to hypothetical species have now been removed from the main text; in the 6th edition, species' names were placed [in brackets] within the appropriate family in the main text, a preferable approach.

Taxonomic treatments are generally consistent and well supported. Although the concept of "taxonomy by committee" has had its vocal detractors (e.g., Phillips 1986), in our view it is distinctly underrated. A primary reason that the *Check-list* is widely considered the standard of North American avifauna is precisely because no one taxonomic viewpoint is allowed to dominate. Instead, particularly with this edition, evidence for each treatment is weighed and a consensus is presented. Inconsistencies still slipped through, however. For example, compare the splitting of Scarlet-rumped Tanager into Passerini's Tanager (*Ramphocelus passerinii*) and Cherrie's Tanager (*P.* [*sic* = *R.*] *costaricensis*) on the basis of "new-school" genetic work (Hackett 1996) with the lumping of the Yellow-throated (*Atlapetes gutturalis*) and White-naped (*A. albinucha*) brush-finches on the basis of "old-school" taxonomy (Paynter 1975 [*sic* = 1978]). Surely a molecular/phylogenetic analysis of the brush-finches today would propose that *at least* two species be recognized.

Anyone working in systematics and taxonomy should recognize that as in any scientific endeavor the boundaries change with each new study, indeed, with each new tidbit of data. To that end it is arguably admirable that the 7th edition did not

attempt to pigeonhole certain groups, such as the becards, certain mourners, and sandgrouse. Instead, these taxa are placed *incertae sedis* in vicinity of their apparent closest relatives. Despite taxonomic uncertainty, however, we would have preferred it if a stand had been taken. The A.O.U. has never seemed particularly shy about upholding the *status quo* in the face of mounting but circumstantial evidence or about making a radical change with minimal information. Given that the *Check-list* is **the** standard for North American avifauna, its users will now find themselves at a loss over the familial placement of the becards, for example.

It would be impossible to please everybody at the level of the species. To be sure, the growing rift between advocates of the biological and phylogenetic species concepts has left a minefield that one must traverse in presenting a particular treatment. Much to the credit of the A.O.U., the biology of the organisms, not just their diagnosability, remains of paramount importance. Even so, published evidence available was weak at best for according some taxa the status of full species, e.g., Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*), Tuxtla Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon carrikeri*), Island Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma insularis*). In other cases, evidence seems to support full species status, yet the taxa remain lumped, e.g., the Eastern (*Trochilus scitulus*) and Western streamertails (*T. polytmus*) and White-winged Junco (*Junco aikeni*). The Streamertail is a particularly odd example, as a note in that account makes it clear that eastern and western populations are highly differentiated by morphology, displays, and vocalizations and interbreed little. By contrast, taxa in the Variable Mountain-gem complex (*Lampornis castaneoventris sensu lato*) are less differentiated yet are accorded full species status.

Common names are generally satisfactory and reflect widespread usage. The tendency towards purging patronyms from North American bird names has thankfully passed, although we still await resurrection of "Coues' Flycatcher" (*Contopus pertinax*) or Sumichrast's Sparrow (*Aimophila sumichrasti*). There are but a few cases where inappropriate common names were chosen, e.g., the recently split Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Why were the new names not simply "Nelson's Sparrow" (*Ammodramus nelsoni*) and "Saltmarsh Sparrow" (*A. caudacutus*) instead of "Sharp-tailed" being retained in the name? We recognize the desire to make it clear that these sister species are both in the Sharp-tailed Sparrow complex, but common names were never meant to reflect systematic position or relatedness (nor should they be—that is in part the very reason we have scientific names). The piling on of "Nelson's" or "Saltmarsh" makes one think that they these names refer to *sub*species of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow, in the same sense that we refer to *Dendroica palmarum hypochrysea* as the Yellow Palm Warbler or *Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii* as Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow. We sincerely hope that the common names for the Sharp-tailed Sparrows are changed, or at the least this convention does not become a trend. After all, the A.O.U. purged clunky names like "Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker" for a reason.

Another problem with common names concerns the splitting of widespread taxa with a single established name. In some cases the widespread name has been maintained when the taxon was split (e.g., Western and Clark's grebes). This practice may be acceptable, particularly in cases where one taxon is uncommon and localized, primarily because it is best to maintain names in widespread usage. Such cases appear not to have been thought out with a view to consistency, however. We note that *Corvus imparatus* has (finally) been renamed the Tamaulipas Crow, rather than the less appropriate Mexican Crow. But then Band-tailed Gull was retained for *Larus belcheri*, when the name Belcher's Gull is used widely; this latter choice would alleviate potential confusion between the Band-tailed and Black-tailed (*L. crassirostris*) gulls. And that decision seems at odds with the introduction of "Eastern Towhee" for the *Pipilo erythrophthalmus* complex of eastern North America. Whereas the name is hardly inaccurate, the name "Rufous-sided Towhee" has a long history for that complex and was established well before the *P. maculatus* (Spotted Towhee) complex was lumped with it in the 1950s.

One of the great strengths of the 7th edition is the practice of noting separately the distributions of strongly differentiated subspecies or subspecies groups, typically accompanied by a short explanation of different taxonomic treatments that these groups receive elsewhere. There are, however, some glaring exceptions. Within the genus *Branta* one finds the usual between-group distinctions made for the Brant. By contrast, despite a thoughtful discussion in the note of potential species-level differences between the large (*B. c. canadensis* group) and small (*B. c. hutchinsii* group) Canada Geese, no distinction is made between their distributions in the actual species account. As a minor aside, note that the discussion of subspecies distributions for the Black Scoter is partly in error, as it is not *nigra* that "summers widely from southern Yukon and southern MacKenzie east to Labrador and Newfoundland." We found a few instances where a taxonomic note was needed but lacking. Perhaps most sorely missed was a comment about Heuglin's Gull (*Larus heuglini*) in the account of the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*). Heuglin's Gull (comprising *L. h. heuglini* and *L. h. taimyrensis*) is increasingly treated as a distinct species (e.g., Kennerley et al. 1995), though also frequently treated as conspecific with *L. fuscus* (e.g., Cramp and Simmons 1983). Failure to mention the Masked Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus ridgwayi*) is also surprising.

Range descriptions in the 7th edition are on the whole more accurate and consistent than in any previous edition, although seabirds seem to have been given less attention than other groups, e.g., the Light-mantled Albatross (*Phoebetria palpebrata*) does not breed on Amsterdam and St. Paul islands. We have a distinct bias, yet find the effort made by the A.O.U. to enlist the help of state and regional reviewers to be a worthwhile undertaking, and one that we hope will continue. This pool of expertise helped ensure that the number of errors in distributional accounts was at a minimum and that records of regional import were likely to be included. Yes, a number of records of rarities were missed, but the number must be far fewer than those included. In so daunting a task, it is not surprising that the reported level of documentation for certain records was erroneous. For example, more than a sight record, the Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) in California was extensively photographed, as was at least one Black Vulture in New Mexico, Red-necked Stint in Nevada, Cayenne Tern in North Carolina, etc. Still, such information about single records is trivial in the bigger picture. Slightly more surprising is the rare *lapsus* in an account. For example, the Forster's Tern occurs "south locally to South Carolina and, formerly, South Carolina." The Great Frigatebird is "not certainly recorded (sight reports only) from the Pacific coast of North or South America," yet the photographic record from California is listed. The Black Rail is somehow a breeder along the lower Colorado River *and* accidental in Arizona. At the same time, we note that information provided by regional reviewers was incorporated into some species accounts but not others. We suggest it would be useful if the A.O.U. maintained a file of unpublished records so that apparently novel records noted in the *Check-list* could be tracked down easily, rather than seeming to have no basis and thus be condemned in subsequent works.

A few accounts simply lack information. Why is there no mention of the American Golden-Plover occasionally wintering in North America (Paulson and Lee 1992)? How is it that winter records for Arizona of the Flammulated Owl were missed? In other cases we question the status given, e.g., neither the White-eared (*Hylocharis leucotis*) nor Berylline (*Amazilia beryllina*) hummingbird is resident in Arizona—indeed, both are quite rare there—or the status was not made clear enough, e.g., the Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) winters only casually from California east through Texas. The use of the status terms "casual" and "accidental" is as consistent as we have seen anywhere, although we wonder why the Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus cachinnans*) is casual in Maryland and the District of Columbia but accidental in Quebec and Newfoundland.

Habitat descriptions are succinct and generally sufficient, but we would have preferred it if an elevational range had been provided for all species, not just tropical

ones. Also, it could be made clear whether these elevations are minima and maxima or represent the typical distribution of the species. In some cases an elevational range is slightly off, e.g., the Crested Guan (*Penelope purpurascens*) occurs up to 2500 m in western Mexico, but usually they are accurate and help provide a better idea about the ecological distribution of a species.

Our final point is best considered a recommendation. We applaud the decision to flag extinct species (with a dagger, †), but wish that nonnative taxa had been flagged too. Given the extraordinary interest in biodiversity in this age of conservation biology, we need to recognize that nonnative taxa simply "do not count." It is impossible to determine in some cases where the native range ends and the nonnative one begins. For example, it is not clear that all populations of the "Wild" Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) have been introduced into California and that only those in southern Arizona are native to that state. If not placed in a different section, the non-native range/status should be described separately (as done with infraspecific groups), and taxa completely nonnative to North America could have a different typeface, as in Hickman (1993) for plants.

In sum, however, any superlative we could summon would be insufficient to praise this fine effort properly. The mountains of data summarized are not without occasional error, but that does not detract from the utility or quality of this volume. That the A.O.U. committee was able to accomplish this task in the wake of Burt Monroe's untimely passing bears witness to its commitment to produce the finest standard possible on North American bird taxonomy and distribution. No birder, ornithologist, or indeed anyone working in conservation biology should be without this volume on his or her shelf.

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