

F O C U S

The New AOU Checklist

Rich Stallcup

THE OFFICIAL SIXTH EDITION of the Checklist of North American Birds has now been released by the American Ornithological Union (AOU). This has been the Bible of avian systematics and distribution in the North American region for almost 100 years. It is the model publication which all regional checklists and birding guide books as well as scientific literature should follow.

Previous editions were printed in 1886, 1895, 1910, 1931, and 1957, with a total of thirty-four intermittent supplements appearing irregularly in the *Auk*, the journal of the AOU. The prestigious Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the AOU, all the members of which are ornithologists, is responsible for keeping the checklist as up-to-date as possible. The current members have logged many hundreds of hours of work. They are Burt L. Monroe (acting chairman, University of Louisville), Kenneth C. Parks (vice-chairman, Carnegie Museum), Lester L. Short (secretary, American Museum of Natural History), Richard C. Banks (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service), Thomas R. Howell (UCLA), Ned K. Johnson (UC Berkeley), and Robert W. Storer (University of Michigan). The volume is dedicated to Eugene Eisenmann, the committee's most recent chairman, who died during the project.

Changes

The major changes between the fifth (1957) and the current edition (other than a number of name changes which have been much covered in the supplements) are:

1. The inclusion of Hawaii, middle America, and the West Indies and the exclusion of Greenland.
2. Coverage restricted to species level rather than racial level. (This leaves the Fifth Edition as the last word on racial identification and distribution for North America north of Mexico.)
3. Adoption of new and convincing ideas of classification and the rearrangement of large numbers of groups and some individual species. (Before grumbling about all the list juggling, consider that it could have been even more surprising. Loons were almost demoted to a spot between alcids and pigeons!)

Furthermore, the Sixth Edition has four appendices to deal with those birds not

on the regular list that in some way have been alluded to as part of the AOU area fauna. The Fifth Edition simply dumped all such difficult cases into a single "Hypothetical" section. These new headings are interesting and fun to read:

1. Sight records which are well-documented and probably correct but which lack physical evidence (specimen or photograph).
2. Species from previous lists which have been removed because of:
 - a. obvious identification or locality error;
 - b. origin of the subject of a record questionable (probable or positive escape);
 - c. exclusive occurrence in Greenland which is no longer a part of checklist geographical consideration;
3. Birds of doubtful taxonomic status and birds of probable or possible hybrid origin;
4. Species which failed to become established despite human attempts at introduction.

Changes in classification and list arrangement are mostly the result of research carried on by graduate students and professional ornithologists. Changes in distribution and the inclusion of species wholly new to the list result primarily from the careful observations of birders. All this research,

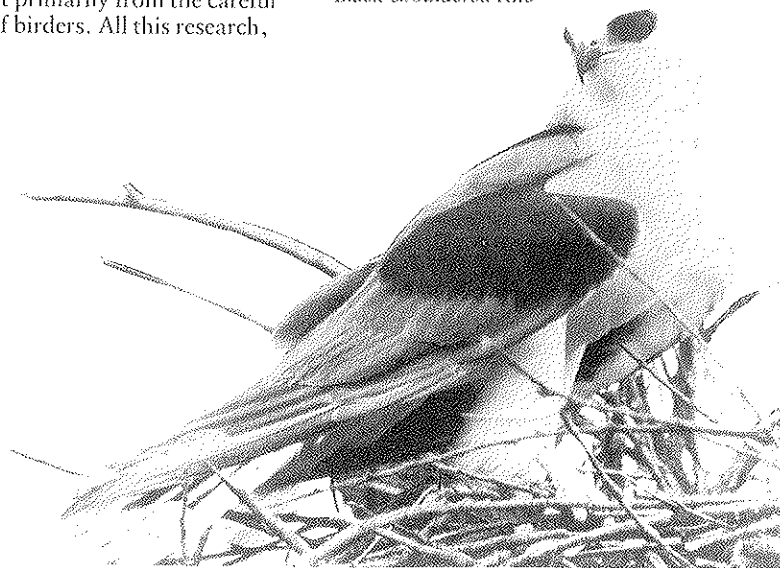
published in ornithological journals (including the *Auk*), is considered by members of the committee.

English names were a major concern of the committee. Most have evolved through the years in the AOU committee; some simply agree with those chosen recently by the American Birding Association (non-professionals mostly, but world-class field ornithologists). Many of these names (especially for middle America) were made up almost randomly by authors of field guides for various areas, resulting in three, four, or five common names for some species. Not all of the English names which appear in the new AOU checklist will please everyone, but at least there is now a standard from which to proceed.

English name changes happen for several reasons:

1. Changes in species status through splitting (declaring races of one species to be species themselves, such as Yellow-footed Gull) or lumping (merging two or more species into one, such as Rosy Finches) result in new names.
2. Adding modifiers to species found within the AOU area to distinguish them from others in the same generic group found elsewhere in the world seems less necessary and tends to clutter checklists: for example, American White Pelican. The usual modifiers are "common," "American," and "northern" and, though they are now official, they do not seem needed for regional checklists or for normal dissertation.

Black-shouldered Kite



After all, the scientific names automatically identify all members of universal genera.

3. Changing our common bird names to agree with English names for the same species elsewhere in the world, as in Common Moorhen and Black-shouldered Kite. It is nice to be cosmopolitan, but these changes are befuddling to people who use American common names. These changes also tend to confuse those who read past publications which use different names. Again, for scientific purposes, scientific names show which birds belong to the same species. The practice of changing names is, so far, not uniform, and there are some obvious contradictions.

WE HAVE VERY PROPERLY ACCEPTED the name Red-necked Phalarope to replace our Northern Phalarope and align ourselves with the British. But we did not change Red Phalarope to agree with the British vernacular, Gray Phalarope, so now we are stuck with Red-necked and Red Phalaropes. Now that we have accepted Common Moorhen to replace our Common Gallinule, should we not urge the U.S. Geological Survey to reclassify some of North America's wetlands as moors so these birds will have shelter? We have now changed our Marsh Hawk to Harrier, which it truly is, but the same species in Europe is Hen Harrier. For some reason, ours became Northern Harrier. If this inconsistency is to avoid demeaning names (Hen Harrier = Chicken Hawk), why fiddle with Marsh Hawk in the first place? Our current Rufous-necked Stint is a combination of our former Rufous-necked Sandpiper and the former British Red-necked Stint, making all previous usage throughout the bird's range obsolete. The new term, Siberian Tit, is altogether poor (and came from the ABA). The species is no more limited to Siberia than is the Snow Goose, and since all of the close cousins remain as chickadees in this country, why switch to tit? At least Thin-billed Murre, the name proposed by the American Birding Association for the Common Murre, did not go through.

Skipping those names with "common," "northern," and "American" as modifiers and those which have undergone mere spelling and hyphen changes, here are some of the name changes for more conspicuous birds of the United States:

Old Name	New Name
New Zealand Shearwater	Buller's Shearwater
Blue-faced Booby	Masked Booby
Louisiana Heron	Tricolored Heron
Green Heron	Green-backed Heron
European Wigeon	Eurasian Wigeon
White-tailed Kite	Black-shouldered Kite
Everglade Kite	Snail Kite
Marsh Hawk	Northern Harrier
Harlequin Quail	Montezuma Quail

Common Gallinule	Common Moorhen
Polynesian Tattler	Gray-tailed Tattler
Rufous-necked Sandpiper	Rufous-necked Stint
Northern Phalarope	Red-necked Phalarope
Rivoli's Hummingbird	Magnificent Hummingbird
Coppery-tailed Trogon	Elegant Trogon
Northern Three-toed Woodpecker	Three-toed Woodpecker
Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker	Black-backed Woodpecker
Beardless Flycatcher	Northern Beardless Tyrannulet
Coues' Flycatcher	Greater Pewee
Olivaceous Flycatcher	Dusky-capped Flycatcher
Wied's Crested Flycatcher	Brown-crested Flycatcher
Mexican Jay	Gray-breasted Jay
White-necked Raven	Chihuahuan Raven
Gray-headed Chickadee	Siberian Tit
Short-billed Marsh Wren	Sedge Wren
Long-billed Marsh Wren	Marsh Wren
Scarlet-headed Oriole	Streak-backed Oriole
Lichtenstein's Oriole	Altamira Oriole

The arrangement of birds on the list has been greatly changed, as will become obvious when you look for such species as Fulvous Whistling Duck, Wilson's Phalarope, Snow Bunting, or Orchard Oriole where they used to be.

Families have been broadly reorganized, the most startling being the lumping of wood warblers, bananaquits, tanagers, cardinal-things, grosbeak-things, Dickcissel, typical sparrows, seedeaters, grassquits, bunting-things, longspurs, towhees, Bobolink, blackbird-things, and orioles into *Emberizidae*.

Many generic and some specific names have also been changed. Scientific names follow the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature set up by the XV International Congress of Zoologists in 1958. A good way to compare old and new scientific names would be to examine "old" and "new" editions of *Birds of North America* by Robbins *et al.*

Getting One

While skimming the new Sixth Edition, it became quickly apparent to me how valuable the information on sub-species, nomenclature, and distribution found in the 1957 Fifth Edition is. Every bird person should have access to this book. However, it is out of print and getting harder to find.

The Sixth Edition of the AOU checklist is easy to get, however, and those interested in birds should acquire a copy (or get your library to get one) and use it as a standard. At \$28 for AOU members, \$35 for non-members, it is still a bargain, and can be mail-ordered from Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas, 66044.

Listing impacts: here is what happens

(↑ = add one if appropriate)
(↓ = subtract one if you've counted both)

BLACK-VENTED SHEARWATER is again withdrawn from the Manx Shearwater complex and is now its own species. (Occurs fall-spring, nearshore mid-California and south.) ↑

WHISTLING AND BEWICK'S SWANS are lumped and become Tundra Swan. ↓

MEXICAN DUCK has the questionable honor of having bred itself into extinction in the area and becomes part of its pollutant, the Mallard. ↓

SOUTH POLAR SKUA is recognized as a different species from Great Skua. (South Polar Skua occurs on both coasts from fall-spring; Great Skua occurs in the far North Atlantic, fall-winter only.) ↑

YELLOW-FOOTED GULL is split off as a separate species from Western Gull. (In U.S., only at Salton Sea late summer-fall.) ↑

SCREECH OWL is split into two species, Eastern and Western. ↑

ANTILLEAN NIGHTHAWK is split from Common Nighthawk. (In U.S., only in South Florida and rare migrant on Dry Tortugas. Call (ki-dick, ki-dick-a-dick) unlike nasal "peent" of Common. A good place to look is the Marathon Airport in the Florida Keys.) ↑

RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER is split from Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. This is a complex group. Of the previous four major races of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, *S. v. varius* and *S. v. nuchalis* (of eastern U.S. and Great Basin Rockies respectively), the two with black and white face patterns remain as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. The two red-headed races, *S. v. ruber* and *S. v. daggetti* (both of the Pacific Coast, Cascade-Sierra), are split and together form the new species. A way to remember which is which is by the face patterns: stripes are Yellow-bellieds and solids are Red-breasteds. ↑

COUCH'S KINGBIRD is split from Tropical Kingbird. Couch's occurs in the U.S. only in south Texas, while Tropical breeds in Southeast Arizona and is a rare fall straggler up the Pacific Coast to British Columbia. Voice is the primary difference. ↑

BROWN-THROATED WREN is now considered part of House Wren. ↓

BLACK-BACKED WAGTAIL is again split from White Wagtail. ↑

YELLOW-GREEN VIREO becomes part of Red-eyed Vireo. ↓

GRAY-HEADED JUNCO, the last to surrender, joins Oregon, Pink-sided, White-winged, and Slate-colored to become the Dark-eyed Junco. ↓

BROWN-CAPPED, BLACK, AND GRAY-CROWNED ROSY FINCHES are all lumped and become the Rosy Finch. ↓↓