

THE NEW A. O. U. CHECK-LIST FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE AMATEUR

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The long-awaited Fifth Edition of the *A. O. U. Check-list of North American Birds* has at last appeared. It will be the basic reference work for distribution and nomenclature in any ornithological library. This is a massive volume about seven hundred pages, much larger than the previous 1931 edition — chiefly because ranges are given in far greater detail.

A useful feature is that the range of the species as a whole is outlined before each subspecies is detailed. This is one aspect of the sound policy to emphasize the species entity, rather than the subspecies. With the 1931 Check-list long obsolete, there has been a great need for a modern single source of distributional data, summarizing a vast quantity of scattered information. The new Check-list provides a base — a new starting point — by which one may test whether a record is significant, or at least unusual. In a work of such large scope, there are bound to be cases where the ardent student of local distribution will find himself in disagreement with a Check-list statement of local status, or where a published record will seem to have been overlooked. Oversight should not be assumed without investigation, for in many instances the A. O. U. Committee had available specimen data not known to local students, or they rejected, as inadequately substantiated, oft-repeated published records. Inevitably, there are instances of valid records overlooked at the periphery of ranges and of doubtful sight reports used as the basis for out-of-range statements without this being indicated. Apparently the *systematic* bibliographic search ended some years before publication, but when is not mentioned. It is a truism that no check-list is ever fully up-to-date: knowledge of bird distribution is constantly increasing, and the ranges themselves show real fluctuation.

In classification the Check-list is conservative a number of separate genera and species survive that some students would lump together. Nevertheless, there are many changes in the scientific names. This is inevitable under our system, because scientific names indicate relationships, and as knowledge accumulates opinions often change as to such relationships and as to their expression in the name. Some changes result from the operation of purely nomenclatural rules or from re-identification of the bird to which a name was attached. The alterations in technical names will occasion few surprises, as most of them had been announced previously in *The Auk* in periodic Supplements to the old Check-list.

The changes having greatest effect on the amateur relate to common or English names. Here a profound reform has been achieved. Until this Check-list, birds with several subspecies had no "official" English *species* name. Previous A. O. U. Check-lists provided each *subspecies* with a separate vernacular name, and often these names gave an inkling of the conspecific relationship. For example, who would surmise that the birds designated in previous Check-lists as Double-crested Cormorant, Florida Cormorant, Farallon Cormorant and White-crested Cormorant were all subspecies of the same species, indistinguishable in the field? The lack of an over-all common name was especially confusing and inconvenient in the West, where a number of subspecies, inseparable in life but bearing distinct

English names, might breed in adjacent areas and might regularly occur together in winter or on migration. To meet the need of an inclusive species name the Committee faced an often difficult problem of selection. In general the Committee has done a creditable job in a controversial field. Usually the most widely used American name was adopted, when not too misleading. Bird-watchers in the Northeast will have relatively few new names to learn, while those on the Pacific coast (unless already acquainted with eastern names) will have to familiarize themselves with many. Even students in the older parts of our country will wish to adopt, among others, Red-necked Grebe (Holboell's), Great Cormorant (European), Common Egret (American), Thick-billed Murre (Brunnich's and Pallas'), Solitary Vireo (Blue-headed, Plumbeous, Cassin's, Mountain), Swainson's Thrush (Olive-backed, Russet-backed), Traill's Flycatcher (Alder, Little), Common Grackle (Purple, Florida, Bronzed), Rufous-sided Towhee (Eastern, White-eyed, Spurred, Spotted, Arctic, etc.).

In some instances, though there was only one check-list area subspecies, the bird also had a wide distribution in the Old World and the name used for the American race would have been misleading and provincial for the species as a whole. This was particularly true of New World forms of wide-ranging species designated "American". In most of such cases the species designation is now "Common". Thus, Common Merganser, Common Gallinule, Common Puffin, and Common Egret are among the many so designated. This practice might well have been varied, especially in cases where the literature provided a better alternate and where "Common" is somewhat inept. Black Scoter for *Oidemia nigra* was surely superior to Common Scoter. One very misleading change is Common Teal for the former European Teal; if the latter were deemed inaccurate, Eurasian Teal would have met the point. Other seemingly needless changes effecting no improvement are Common Crow (formerly American) and American Widgeon (Baldpate). It is of course inevitable that in matters of this kind opinions will differ. Probably most amateurs would have more consistently favored names having some identification usefulness over names commemorating an early ornithologist, where both were about equally well-known: e. g. Pine-woods rather than Bachman's Sparrow. This reviewer does regret that with respect to species barely entering our area or reported only occasionally, the Check-list did not more generally adopt the names used in literature applicable to the countries where the species is resident. Thus for example, why should a pure accidental be here called Gray Sea Eagle, when in Europe where it breeds it is known as White-tailed Eagle? Why should Australasian pelagics called in their nesting areas Short-tailed and Flesh-footed Shearwaters be designated here (where they occur only casually) Slender-billed and Pale-footed? It should however be noted that in this international phase, the new Check-list shows enormous improvements, and many names have been altered to conform with usage in Europe, the West Indies or Middle America. This has at times involved drastic changes in names of birds which are just as much American as Old World, Peregrine Falcon (Duck Hawk), Dunlin (Red-backed Sandpiper), Whimbrel (Hudsonian Curlew), Common Snipe (Wilson's).

The most controversial decision of the Committee was the omission of all subspecific English names. Subspecific vernaculars vastly and confusingly

multiplied the number of names to be learned, gave the amateur a false impression that subspecies were discrete entities, and encouraged pretended sight identifications of races distinguishable only by expert comparison of specimen series. There were, however, arguments for supplying subspecific prefixes to the species names. Inconvenience may be experienced in some situations by the lack of an "official" English subspecific designation, though, of course, anyone competent to distinguish a subspecies should know the technical name. Still, the soundness of the policy to emphasize the species (the natural entity) and to de-emphasize the subspecies (often an arbitrary division of populations) can hardly be questioned.

In orthography the Check-list has effected a very considerable standardization. In almost all compound nouns, particularly group names, the hyphen has been discarded with the word written as one. We have Oystercatcher, Waterthrush, Ovenbird, Goldeneye, Oldsquaw. Such confusing inconsistencies of the older lists, as Redhead and Canvas-back, have disappeared; both are now a single word. Probably through oversight, a very few inconsistencies survive or have crept in, which could be easily corrected.

The book sells for \$8.00, which is far below its cost. It is reasonable at today's prices for a big volume that any true bird student, amateur or professional, will be regularly consulting over a period of many years. It should be ordered from The A. O. U. Treasurer, Dr. Charles Sibley, Fernow Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

American Museum of Natural History, New York 24

EXCERPTS FROM THE MINUTES OF THE FEDERATION COUNCIL MEETING Rochester, May 4, 1958

The eleventh annual meeting of the council of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, Inc., was called to order by President Allan S. Klonick. Delegates from 17 affiliated clubs were present.

Financial

The following report was given by the treasurer:

Balance on hand (January 1, 1957) -----	\$ 706.21
Receipts -----	1099.00
Expenditures -----	\$1162.73

Balance on hand (December 31, 1957) ----- \$ 642.48

Balance in permanent fund (December 31, 1957) --- \$ 779.75

The treasurer's report was accepted by the council. .

Gerald Rising gave the report of the finance committee as follows:

Total proposed budget for 1957 -----	\$1270.00
Expenses for 1957 -----	\$1162.73
Proposed budget for 1958 -----	\$1335.00

Proposed budget was accepted by the council.

Committees

Conservation: Mr. John J. Conway reported for this committee. He stated the passage of two model hawk and owl bills in the 1958 legislature.

Because of the lack of conservation suggestions and proposals from the affiliated clubs, he urged that the delegates come with proposals in the future.

The following three resolutions prepared by this committee were passed by the council: