

A DISCUSSION OF CHANGES ARISING FROM THE FORTY-FOURTH SUPPLEMENT TO THE AOU CHECK-LIST

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The American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list of North American Birds* is the primary taxonomic authority for *The Kingbird* and, indeed, the vast majority of North American ornithological publications. The revisions to this work, which are published periodically as Supplements in *The Auk*, are a source of diverse reactions within the birding community. Amusement, frustration, satisfaction, and resentment have followed these official pronouncements over the years. An obvious reason for some birders to care about the details of taxonomy involves the waxing and waning fortunes of their lists, but some of the strongest reactions I can recall have involved changes to popular and time-honored English names. The present note provides some discussion and explanation of the changes adopted in the most recent 44th Supplement (*The Auk* 120: 923-931).

Of the seven changes to the New York State Checklist summarized in *The Kingbird* (53: 218), three are minor alterations of names that do not substantively alter our understanding of the relationships among birds. Two of these reflect slight grammatical modifications to the endings of specific names to bring them into conformity with the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature: *Poecile atricapilla* (Black-capped Chickadee) should be *P. atricapillus* (as it once was); and *Seiurus aurocapillus* (Ovenbird) should be *S. aurocapilla*. These relate to the issue of whether the names were originally intended as adjectives or as nouns in apposition, which in turn would determine whether they must agree in gender with their current genus names. Another revision reflects a change in an English name (Rock Dove to Rock Pigeon) to conform to a recent name change by the British Ornithologists' Union.

The remaining changes are less pedantic and reflect revised interpretations of taxonomic relationships at various levels. For example, the change from *Picoides tridactylus* (Three-toed Woodpecker) to *P. dorsalis* (American Three-toed Woodpecker) reflects the splitting of the former species. On the basis of genetic and vocal differences, the North American populations (including those found in NYS) have been split from the Eurasian populations and placed in their own species.

At the genus level, the screech-owl genus *Otus* has also been split. Almost all of the New World species formerly placed in *Otus* (including NYS' Eastern Screech-Owl) have been given the genus name *Megascops* to reflect their close relationships to one another and their distinctiveness with respect to Old World species of *Otus*.

Also at the genus level, the Snowy Owl's monotypic genus *Nyctea* has been merged with the genus *Bubo*. Although the Snowy Owl's distinctive plumage might seem sufficiently different from that of Great Horned and Eagle owls to

warrant a separate genus, genetic data show that some members of *Bubo* are more closely related to the Snowy Owl than they are to other members of *Bubo*. Retaining Snowy Owl in its own genus would therefore misrepresent known relationships — or require that additional genera be created for the less closely related species currently placed in *Bubo*.

The final change affecting the NYS Checklist involves a major shift in our understanding of the higher-order relationships among birds. The 7th Edition of the AOU Check-List(1998) recognizes that modern birds fall into two superorders—one comprising the ratites and tinamous (Paleognathae), and the other comprising all other extant orders of birds (Neognathae). In general, there has been very little consensus among ornithologists regarding the relationships among orders within the Neognathae, but a series of studies over the last several decades has clarified this problem to some extent. Multiple lines of evidence support the view that the order Anseriformes (ducks, geese, swans, and relatives) is the sister-group of the order Galliformes (chachalacas, pheasants, grouse, and relatives)—and furthermore that this pair (generally known as the Galloanseres) is the sister-group of the remainder of the Neognathae (all other typical birds). The immediate practical effects of recognizing these relationships are to move the Anseriformes and Galliformes next to each other in checklist sequences, and to move them both to a position at the start of Neognathae. Because NYS obviously has no accepted records of wild ratites or tinamous, this means that our state list will now begin with Whistling-Ducks—Fulvous for now, but perhaps Black-bellied in the future!
