

REVIEWS

Check-list of North American birds: The species of birds of North America from the Arctic through Panama, including the West Indies and Hawaiian Islands, prepared by the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union. Sixth edition, 1983. Publ. American Ornithologists' Union. 877 pages.

Considerations of utility — a primary requirement in any checklist — were responsible for the main innovation in this edition, the omission of separate listings of subspecies. It was decided to expand the scope of the North American checklist to include the Hawaiian Islands, Middle America and the West Indies. These avifaunas, together with the already substantial temperate mainland list, required the treatment of more than 2000 species; hence the decision on practical grounds to restrict the list to the species level. Yet the Committee emphasises in its preface its strong endorsement of “the concept of the subspecies and the continued use of trinomials to express it. . . it is the Committee’s hope and intent that the species-level sixth edition will serve as a framework for future publications that will carry the taxonomy of the avifauna within the Check-list area to the subspecies level”. (For the many workers requiring an authoritative subspecies list in the meantime, reference is recommended to the fifth edition plus supplements or, for Middle America and the West Indies, to Peters’ *Check-list of Birds of the World* and to “those regional works that have critically evaluated subspecies included in their areas”.)

The outcome is a highly usable and reasonably compact 877-page single volume, with excellent end-paper maps; it provides, incidentally, a model for any checklist in practical layout and clear typography. Fossil records are not included (available for North America in Pierce Brodkorb’s *Catalogue of Fossil Birds*, 1963-78, Bull. Florida State Museum). Species entries are not numbered, but a list of “A.O.U. Numbers” is given at the end of the volume.

The criteria for inclusion are clearly stated in the preface: the main body of the work comprises species for which there is a published record of occurrence within the Check-list area (up to 31 December 1981). Unpublished records new to the area have been included if the Committee was able to verify them. (It is interesting to note that “much of the distributional data for species whose occurrence in the Check-list area is well documented is based on sight records”.) There are four appendices:

1. Species recorded in the Check-list area only on the basis of observation;
2. Species no longer accepted in the main text (mainly rejected as erroneous);
3. Forms of doubtful identity or of hybrid origin that have been given a formal scientific name; and
4. Deliberately introduced species or escaped captives not satisfactorily demonstrated to have become established.

The contrast with the size of the avifauna involved in the preparation of our own forthcoming revised checklist (under 300 species) is obvious — it is to be hoped that we can safely spread ourselves to subspecies without the fear, as was the case with the A.O.U. checklist, that “if [the Committee] had emulated previous committees by evaluating critically all of the described subspecies within the Check-list area, there would be little hope of publishing the work before the 21st Century”!

The entries in the North American checklist are basically the same as will be provided in the revised New Zealand checklist: scientific name, preferred English name (and where applicable Maori), original citation and type locality, a general summary of habitat(s) occupied, the geographical distribution, and, where necessary, notes on relevant matters not covered by the foregoing. The New Zealand checklist, however, will differ in having no formal “habitat” paragraph, habitat and distributional information being combined in a single general paragraph. Habitat information is necessarily on the broadest lines in the North American checklist, where a wide range of highly diverse habitats is involved, whereas in New Zealand, where there was less diversity in the original habitats, more emphasis is required on habitat changes (especially in the forest cover). An attempt is being made in the New Zealand checklist to indicate changes in status due to man’s modification of the environment. In addition, the revised New Zealand checklist will incorporate — listed in the main body of the text in systematic sequence — subfossil (and the few fossil) forms and will include information on subfossil distribution from recent palaeontological and archaeological research.

To conclude this review, some excerpts from the A.O.U. Committee’s Preface will serve to emphasise the background and problems inherent in the preparation of any biological checklist. “The continuous flow of new information on avian relationships and distribution renders any checklist instantly obsolete in at least some respects, and the need for revision and addition inevitably increases through time . . . the Committee feels a special responsibility to avoid introducing sweeping changes in taxonomic concepts that would drastically affect the form and content of the list unless such proposed changes have been adequately debated and widely accepted on the basis of published evidence . . . (under “Higher Categories”) our interpretation of the original charge that the Check-list should represent ‘a classification as well as a nomenclature of the birds’ is that it should constitute both a workable and a working hypothesis of avian systematics . . . We wish to have our classification regarded and evaluated as a *working hypothesis* — a set of proposals to be challenged and vigorously tested, then supported, modified, or rejected and replaced, all to the ultimate advancement of ornithological knowledge.”

Finally, all checklist users (and compilers!) should note well the “banner” across the A.O.U. checklist title page: “Zoological nomenclature is a means, not an end, to Zoological Science”.

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