

BOOK REVIEWS

THE NEW AUSTRALIAN BIRD LIST

It is almost exactly 50 years since the parent body of Australian ornithology, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, produced an official list of the birds of Australia. For the first 25 to 30 years or so most authors of non-taxonomic works adhered fairly strictly to both the scientific and vernacular nomenclature of this work. However in later years, notwithstanding the publishing of nine Supplements in *The Emu* between 1941 and 1967, it has been generally accepted that certain aspects of the accepted R.A.O.U. list are very much out of date with the findings of more recent research and with current convention, and there has been a growing tendency for authors of both scientific and popular works to 'be their own taxonomist,' with the result that we now have a situation where the nomenclature of Australian birds, both scientific and vernacular, is in complete chaos.

During the latter half of 1975 the R.A.O.U. published two works intended to rectify this situation:—

- Checklist of the Birds of Australia: Part 1, Non-Passerines*, by H. T. Condon and
Interim List of Australian Songbirds: Passerines, by R. Schodde.

It is unfortunate that a complete checklist could not have been produced in one volume, but the amount of research still required on the relationships of some of the passerines is such that there could still be a delay of several years. It can also be argued that such important works as these should not have been the responsibility of individuals, but of a Checklist Committee (which indeed it was until 1967). However, both lists were produced after consultation with a number of leading ornithologists, (the *Interim List* in fact is a collective effort), and there is more than a little truth in the saying that the most efficient committee is a committee of one.

As their names imply the two works are quite dissimilar in intent and format. It is my intention herewith to review each publication separately, then conclude with general remarks. I have confined my attention mainly to South Australian species and comparisons are made with both the 1926 Checklist and its Supplements and Condon's *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia*, the three editions of which have been the accepted authority on South Australian birds since 1962.

INTERIM LIST OF AUSTRALIAN SONGBIRDS: PASSERINES by R. Schodde, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne, 1975, 46 + vi pp., price \$3.00 inc. postage.

Australian passerine taxonomy is infinitely more complex than that of the non-passerines. It is still undecided as to which family some species belong, and the number of uncertainties increase progressively at the generic, specific and subspecific level. Recent work by Sibley on egg-white protein has shown hitherto unsuspected relationships within the Australian avifauna. A great amount of field observation and collection of specimens, especially throughout tropical Australia and the islands to the north, is still required before true relationships can be determined. As perhaps a minor example of the lack of positive knowledge, on p. 9 in debating whether the whistlers *Pachycephala simplex* and *P. griseiceps* are conspecific it is stated, "According to some their calls are identical but others disagree." In my own, admittedly limited, experience there is not the slightest similarity between the calls of the two Australian forms, but I have not had field experience with related forms in New Guinea and Timor. Recordings of the calls of all populations are obviously required. I have previously, when discussing the non-recognition of the Western Whipbird for so many years (*South Australian Ornithologist*, 24, 159) queried the "ear" for bird calls of the average bird observer. At least this example illustrates the difficulties involved in making a definite decision on problems such as this. It also adds weight to the argument raised later for the use of separate vernacular names for readily recognisable subspecies.

Thus, as the title implies, the work under review is basically an official R.A.O.U. list of Australian passerines, as up to date as possible, to complement Part 1 of the Checklist, and recommended for use by all Australian bird observers until Part 2 of the Checklist can be produced. The list itself occupies only 13 pages, and for each species there is only the scientific name, with author, 1926 Checklist name if this differs, and recommended vernacular. Of particular interest is the 26-page preface which explains the reasons for decisions made. Although the delimitation and arrangement of families was the responsibility of the author, the taxa and their arrangement within the families was the responsibility of three other

workers in addition to the author. The species "are not numbered to avoid changes that will undoubtedly accumulate before Part 2 is published." Indeed in the reviewer's opinion, numbering is quite unnecessary. 307 indigenous species and naturally occurring migrants, 16 introduced species and one indefinite (*Hirundo tahitica*) are recorded in 34 families, three of which include introduced species only.

South Australians will find many changes from Condon's Handlist. The genera *Pteropodocys*, *Sphenostoma*, *Hylacola*, *Pyrrholaemus*, *Calamanthus*, *Chthonicola*, *Myzantha* and *Aegintha* disappear, but *Melanodryas* reappears. At the species level we see the reappearance of *neoxena* for our common swallow which returns to the vernacular of Welcome Swallow, and the re-emergence of the Western Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria griseogularis* as a full species. On the other hand we 'lose' *Chlamydera guttata*, *Stipiturus mallee*, *Malurus callainus* and *M. melanotus* (both included in *M. splendens*). All the stripe-crowned pardalotes are united under *Pardalotus striatus*, Striated Pardalote; this will no doubt be a profound relief to those who have spent hours peering at these active and un-cooperative birds in the tops of tall trees in the eastern States, trying to determine colour of wingspot and the number of wing feathers with white patches. As is now conventional all sittellas are lumped, but owing to the rules of priority the genus becomes *Daphoenositta*. All South Australian members of the genus *Meliphaga* are now placed in *Lichenostomus*, and the martins continue on their chequered career (*Hylochelidon* in the 1926 Checklist, *Petrochelidon* in Condon's Handlist and other later works, and now placed in the Afro-Indian *Cecropis*). In contrast to some recent authors the Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater is retained in *Acanthagenys*. The recent practice of calling the wet and dry country members of the Brown Thornbill complex separate species, *pusilla* and *apicalis* respectively is continued: the true relationship between these forms is a problem urgently requiring solution. Separating the tropical member as *Acanthiza katherina* is however not unwise at this stage of knowledge.

As in the Non-Passerine Checklist, vernacular names of the 1926 Checklist have been retained as far as possible. The two authors differ in their views in vernacular names, however, Schodde believing that for species that range beyond Australia the name most widely or authoritatively used internationally ought to be adopted, also that if the name of an Australian species duplicates a well established name for

another species that does not occur in Australia, the name for our species should be changed. The author considers that vernacular names ought not to be given for subspecies "unless perhaps exceptions are very occasionally made for a few distinctive subspecies." Considering the chaotic state of vernacular names used in recent publications, there are relatively few changes from accepted South Australian names. The Mountain (or Ground) Thrush, also known as White's Thrush and no doubt other names, becomes Scaly Thrush, an interestingly appropriate alternative; Reed Warbler becomes Clamorous Reed Warbler; *Cisticola* is used as a vernacular, as is *Hylacola*, even though this genus is absorbed in *Sericornis*. The use of the submerged *Calamanthus* instead of Fieldwren (there are so many -wrens) is here suggested for consideration. *Acanthiza nana* becomes Yellow Thornbill (Schodde no doubt has a very good reason for rejecting the time-honoured Little Thornbill); the sittellas become Varied Sittella (there is another 'good' species in New Guinea), *Lichenostomus* (= *Meliphaga*) *plumula* is more accurately called Grey-fronted Honeyeater; the Turquoise and Black-backed Wrens become submerged in Splendid Wren, although here (and also with the sittellas) there is a good case for the retention of subspecific vernaculars. It is pleasing to the reviewer that attempts by various authors to change Red-lore Whistler and Singing and Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters have been unsuccessful. The 'eastern-states influence' no doubt prevailed in calling *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae* the New Holland Honeyeater rather than Yellow-winged Honeyeater as in the 1926 Checklist and Condon's Handlists. A uniform treatment of possessives, e.g. Gilbert's whistler and Bower's Shrikethrush is to be commended. It is pleasing to note on p. 26 that "It is planned to publish a review and discussion of vernacular nomenclature for all Australian birds, giving detailed reasons for the choice of names officially recommended, wherever they are needed."

In conclusion, Dr. Schodde and his co-workers are to be congratulated on their handling of a very difficult task.

DISCUSSION

So, do we at last have an Australian birdlist that one can recommend for use throughout Australia and also internationally? As far as scientific nomenclature is concerned there have been few controversial decisions, and undoubtedly in the passerines there will be some changes when the Checklist Part 2 is eventually pub-

lished. However with vernacular names the situation is more complicated. Unlike scientific names which are governed by the *International Rules of Zoological Nomenclature*, there are no rules governing vernacular names. The opinion that it does not matter what common name one uses as long as the correct scientific name is used is just as legitimate as the one that every species (or even subspecies) in the world should have its own individual vernacular name. The two authors quite 'legitimately' have varying views on vernacular names. Having had long discussions with both authors on the matter of vernacular names, but several years apart, I must confess that my own views have changed in certain areas in the intervening period. I know that I am not alone in this respect. Condon's manuscript was completed in October 1973, and I have no doubt most decisions on vernaculars were made well before this. There are no legitimate grounds for criticism of vernacular names by either author; disagreement *yes*, but criticism *no*.

But, unlike most branches of zoology where vernacular names do not even exist, vernacular names are the language of the average bird observer, whose observations constitute the bulk of the data published in Australian ornithological literature (how many of us think in scientific names?). Many Australian birds are closely related to, if not conspecific with, extra-Australian species, particularly in New Guinea, Indonesia and other islands to the north. Also with the tremendous proliferation of popular books on birds in recent years, it is not inconceivable that in the foreseeable future there will be field guides available covering every part of the earth's surface and every known species of bird. There is therefore a very strong argument that every bird species should have its own individual vernacular name, and to avoid confusion, only one vernacular name should be accepted in the literature. The only exception, to my mind, would be the case of dimorphic species, such as the Grey (or White) Goshawk, and even here a new name which covers both phases could perhaps be more appropriate.

There is a difference between verbal and written vernaculars. One may talk of Magpies, Crows, Greenies, etc., but when submitting observations in writing, one should always use official vernaculars, preferably with scientific names. I well remember the "flutter" caused some years ago when it was reported by a member that 'Ground Parrots' were common at a certain River Murray locality. It eventuated that the "Ground Parrots" of the member

were actually *Psephotus haematonotus*, generally called Red-rumped Parrot.

Research continues and conventions change; so changes must occur in both scientific and vernacular nomenclature; but one can still argue for an official and universally acceptable Australian birdlist, which *must* be kept up to date with supplements, and stabilised by the publication of complete editions of official Checklists at considerably less than 50-year intervals.

Vernacular names for subspecies is an entirely different issue. Unless subspecies can be readily recognised in the field (morphologically, not geographically), to give them separate vernaculars could only make bird nomenclature more confusing than it is now. However at the present position of the taxonomic pendulum, which swings periodically between splitting and lumping, there are a number of subspecies which are readily recognisable in the field except in what are usually relatively small areas within which certain forms overlap and interbreed. As every editor of an ornithological journal is well aware, there are many very competent bird observers who report their observations only in the vernacular. The common form of *Vanellus miles*, Masked Plover throughout South Australia is the subspecies *novaehollandiae*, which is commonly known as the Spur-winged Plover. However the race *miles* has been reported close to Adelaide. If "Masked Plover" is reported does this refer to the common or the rare race? Should a yellow parrot along the River Murray be called Crimson Rosella? As the ranges of *Platycercus elegans elegans* and *P. e. flaveolus*, and *P. e. flaveolus* and *P. e. adelaidae* overlap, many valuable distributional records are lost if all are reported as "Crimson Rosella." The various races of the Varied Sittella are very different morphologically except in the relatively small areas of geographical overlap. The retention of Turquoise and Black-backed Wren is a legitimate request. The Australian Magpie presents a technical problem. The range of overlap between white-backed and black-backed forms is both broad and long. What constitutes 'White-backed' or 'Black-backed' within the range of hybridisation? And for that matter is it known whether hybridisation between the two forms is a common occurrence or not? (see *Emu*, 76, 30-36, 1976 for a recent paper on this subject). Has enough research been done in areas where other related forms overlap to determine whether hybridisation ever occurs; occurs but produces infertile offspring; only rarely occurs, but produces fertile offspring; or commonly occurs producing fertile offspring? (The

preceding question is based upon a very forceful verbal argument by John Cox.)

There are other examples to support my argument but the above should suffice. As the R.A.O.U. is planning to publish a review and discussion of vernacular nomenclature, it is strongly urged to consider the question of official vernacular names for subspecies that are readily recognisable, by sight or by voice, but not by geographical location only or for purely sentimental grounds based on long usage; i.e. where their use by the amateur field worker can add to our knowledge of bird status and distribution. Finally, as an ex-editor, I must herewith conclude with a plea to amateurs to learn scientific names and include them in their bird-notes, BUT do not use trinomials unless a subspecies has been positively identified on morphological grounds.

BRIAN GLOVER.

CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA: PART 1, NON-PASSERINES, by H. T. Condon, Royal Australasian Ornithological Union, Melbourne, 1975, 311 + xx pp., 2 maps, price \$10.50.

My initial impression on examining this work was that the basic taxonomy was 'intelligently conservative' and upon further study, although I do not agree with all the author's views, I find no reason for changing this opinion.

Apart from the short introductory section which explains the principles upon which the work was compiled, a list of references, a gazetteer and indices to common and scientific names, the bulk of the publication consists of the Checklist proper. Each indigenous living species is numbered consecutively (1 to 393); then follow the scientific binomial, its author, vernacular name and in parentheses the serial number of the species in the 1926 Checklist. A complete synonymy follows, then a brief summary of Australian and world range, and in a number of cases, particularly with subspecies, brief identification notes. Lastly any alternative vernacular names in common use are given. 43 fossil species (which are printed in Old English type), 10 introductions, extinct forms and species whose occurrence in Australia are not positively authenticated are unnumbered. Subspecies are treated separately under the main species heading and with one exception, *Northiella haematogaster narethae* ("also called Naretha Parrot"), these are not given vernacular names, although the author agrees with

the principle of giving separate vernaculars to readily recognisable subspecies.

I agree with the author that vernacular names should be written with capital letters, e.g. Little Grebe, with the closure of some previously hyphenated names, e.g. Tropicbird instead of Tropic-Bird, and the separation of others, e.g. Marsh Crake instead of Marsh-Crake, although I think Giant-petrel is more appropriate as two words. Vernaculars are mostly those of the 1926 Checklist "except for a few either where more appropriate names have come into use, e.g. Black-faced Cormorant for White-breasted Cormorant, or where minor improvements could be made with little alteration." The author does not believe that extra-Australian species should of necessity be known by their most widely used vernacular. Even so, calling *Anas rhynchotis* merely Shoveler is surely an over-simplification, particularly as another species, the Northern Shoveler has been recorded for Australia. Changing the traditional Boobook Owl to Spotted Owl may not receive general acceptance.

Condon's classification basically follows the traditional one of Wetmore, but with some modifications that should cause no major controversies, e.g. the merging of the large ratites in a single order and placing these at the beginning of the list. There has been a considerable suppression of genera since the 1926 Checklist, most of these in the published Supplements, but there have been a number of changes in scientific names both at the generic and specific level from the author's *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia*, (3rd Edn., 1969), e.g. *Tribonyx* is merged with *Gallinula*, although *Porphyrio* is retained; *Cacomantis* is merged with *Cuculus*; *Eurostopodus* becomes *Caprimulgus*. We see the return of *Erythrogonys*, and at the species level *Hydroprogne caspia* and *Charadrius ruficapillus*. There has not been the gross lumping of genera in the terms and platycercine parrots as in Storr's *List of Queensland Birds* (1973). Placing our three grebes in separate genera may not be popular, and the separation of *Morus*, *Northiella* and a few other genera will no doubt cause controversy.

A number of species are recognised on the basis of sight records only, in at least one case (*Numenius arquata*) on the basis of a single record; in the 1926 Checklist at least three records were required for a species to be included in the numerical sequence. A number of individual records are cited of rarely recorded species (for Australia or a State). There are a number of equally important and relevant pub-

lished observations by competent observers that were equally deserving of inclusion; but here I am perhaps being super-critical. There are a number of cases where distributional data leaves much to be desired. In addition I have been informed that there are a considerable number of inaccuracies in the data on the seabirds in particular; it is to be hoped that these will be submitted to the R.A.O.U. for eventual published correction.

However, the basic taxonomy should not cause too much controversy. My only serious criticism is that reasons are not always given for nomenclatural changes.