

## MORE ON THE ABA CHECKLIST COMMITTEE

This article is another in an ongoing series of reports about the workings of the ABA Checklist Committee (CLC).

In the July/August 2006 issue of *Birding* (pp. 20–22), I discussed how the CLC addressed the issue of provenance of a Thick-billed Parrot that was found in New Mexico during 2003. The CLC concluded that the parrot probably was transported to the region, perhaps by smugglers, then escaped and was discovered on a private ranch (Pranty 2006, Pranty et al. 2006). The first part of this article continues this theme. During their deliberations, members of bird records committees such as the CLC often have to consider the issue of natural vs. artificial provenance. Birds can appear in the ABA Area as a result of human assistance, whether intentional (for example, the release of a noisy pet or of a small population of game birds) or unintentional (for example, cage birds that escape) and whether directly or indirectly.

### “Origin Uncertain” and “Origin Hypothetical”

In reviewing the status of birds reported in a region, some records will fall in between the “accepted” and “not accepted” categories. Such records usually involve species that are correctly identified, but whose provenance (origin) is uncertain. For groups such as water-

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fowl, psittacids, and certain songbirds, the possibility of escape must be considered. For others, the issue is whether the bird could have made at least a part of its journey by riding on a ship. Over the years, the CLC has created—and in some cases, abandoned—methods for addressing the issue of human assistance possibly affecting bird occurrence. In 1993, the CLC created the “Origin Uncertain” category with the following commentary (DeBenedictis et al. 1994a):

A bane of bird records committees are reports of birds whose natural occurrence within a checklist area is uncertain. Usually, such records spend long

periods under debate, with little expectation that the controversy can be resolved unless additional records that establish a pattern of occurrence are obtained. Unfortunately, failure to publicize records also may discourage observers from submitting the information needed to determine the true status of these species...

Three species were initially placed into this category: White-chinned Petrel (Galveston, Texas, 27 April 1986); Belcher’s (then known as Band-tailed) Gull (Marco Island and Pensacola, Florida, various dates between Sep-



**Belcher’s Gull**, previously known as Band-tailed Gull, originally appeared on the ABA Checklist as an entry in the “Origin Uncertain” category. It has since been added to the main body of the Checklist. San Diego, California; October 1997. © Tony Mercieca.

tember 1968 and March 1976); and Black Catbird (Brownsville, Texas, 21 June 1892). The category was short-lived, however. After quickly adding a fourth species (European Turtle-Dove, Lower Matecumbe Key, Florida, 9–11 April 1990; DeBenedictis et al. 1994b), the CLC eliminated the Origin Uncertain category in February 1997 (ABA 2002) and deleted those four species from the ABA Checklist (Dunn 1997). The Belcher’s Gull and European Turtle-Dove were added to the ABA Checklist subsequently, the White-chinned Petrel is currently under reevaluation by the CLC, and the Black

Catbird record remains struck from the ABA list.

In February 2002, the CLC created the “Origin Hypothetical” category to address the “increasing number of records whose origin is problematic” (Robbins et al. 2003). The Origin Hypothetical category was designed to treat “those records for which it is impossible to ascertain whether a bird arrived via a ‘natural’ vs. human-assisted means” (Robbins et al. 2003). Curiously, the “Origin Hypothetical” category did *not* include the four species previously on the “Origin Uncertain” list. Rather, the new list included the following three species: Light-mantled Albatross (Cordell Bank, California, 17 July 1994), Dark-billed Cuckoo (Weslaco, Texas, 10 February 1986), and Blue Rock Thrush (West Spences Bridge, British Columbia, 6 June 1997). A fourth species, Ruddy Shelduck (East Bay, Nunavut, 23 July 2000), was added the following year (Robbins et al. 2004). The status of Light-mantled Albatross record was recently reevaluated by the CLC (see below), but the three other species remain on the Origin Hypothetical list.

#### Human-assisted Vagrancy

The provenance of many species that stray to the ABA Area can never be known with certainty. Many landbirds from the American tropics have been known to roost on oil-drilling platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, while some Old World species have been known to land on ships and ride them across the Atlantic Ocean. And the occurrence of virtually every other vagrant has at least the potential to have been ship-assisted—who can say with certainty that an individual bird avoided all human structures during its trans-oceanic flight to reach the ABA Area?

One of the most common forms of human assistance is for an out-of-range bird to successfully land on a ship for some of its journey. Ship assistance can be direct (as when a bird lands on a ship and is captured and held captive until its release) or indirect (as when a bird simply follows a ship, or lands on a ship but is not handled by humans). The CLC has altered its policy on ship assistance over the years, reflecting varying opinions of CLC members—and the fact that there is no “correct” way to address the issue.

The CLC’s policy on ship-assisted vagrancy was that “the necessary condition to disqualify a record is evidence that a bird was *both* ship-assisted *and* restrained” (ABA 1996). This definition later was discarded in favor of a more-conservative and less-defined policy in which each CLC member applies his or her own philosophy regarding ship assistance when evaluating a record of a bird that probably crossed a great expanse of water to reach the ABA Area

(Dunn 1997). In some cases (e.g., the August 2004 Red-footed Falcon in Massachusetts; Pranty et al. 2006), the mere possibility of ship assistance does not preclude acceptance of a record, while in other cases (perhaps every vagrant to the Bering Sea region; see Lehman 2000, 2003), ship assistance is not even considered. An interesting case of known ship assistance will soon come before the CLC: For nine days in April–May 2005, a Greylag Goose took up residence on a drilling ship stationed 125 miles southeast of Newfoundland (Maybank 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2006), a record that, if accepted, will furnish the first for the New World.

The issue of human-assisted vagrancy also has relevance to bird use of feeders and nesting boxes. Consider, for example, that most out-of-range hummingbirds (and many extralimital thrushes, sparrows, and finches) are found at backyard feeders. The spread of Muscovy Ducks into southern Texas was the result of a nest-box program in northern Mexico (Gill 1988). Nearly all Chimney Swifts now nest and roost in chimneys, and virtually all Purple Martins east of the Mississippi River nest in hollowed-out gourds or “apartments”. Given that the provenance of virtually all extralimital species can never be known with certainty, and considering that such occurrences are likely to increase in the future as the human population increases and the amount of natural habitat decreases, it seems likely that the issue of human-assisted vagrancy will continue to be a “hot-button” topic with bird records committees.

#### Differences Between the ABA and AOU Checklists

The ABA Area encompasses Canada, the 49 continental United States, the French islands of St. Pierre et Miquelon, and adjacent waters up to 200 miles offshore or half the distance to a neighboring country, whichever is less. The area encompassed by the American Ornithologists’ Union for North America includes the entire ABA Area plus the Hawaiian Islands, Mexico, Central America, the West Indies, Bermuda, Clipperton Island, and the Gulf of Mexico islands of Swan, Providencia, and San Andres (AOU 1998).

Given that the ABA and AOU each have their own respective bird records committees, one might expect that the species accepted as occurring within the ABA Area would differ significantly between the two lists. However, only a few species reported within the ABA Area are found on the ABA *Checklist* but not the AOU *Check-list*, and vice versa. The overall agreement in species between the ABA and AOU lists is the result of two primary factors: (1) the goals of both committees are the same, namely, to document in the region the occurrence of all bird species recorded via

photographs, specimens, sound recordings, or videotape evidence (sight-only reports cannot add a bird to either the ABA or AOU list); and (2) the CLC shares its deliberations with AOU's committee, which does not vote on a bird new to the ABA Area until after the CLC has voted. The AOU committee is not bound by the CLC's decision, but the CLC's deliberations are taken into consideration. Even though the two committees work independently, they may share some of the same members (Jon L. Dunn and Andy Kratter currently serve on both committees) and they usually arrive at identical decisions.

Of the 939 species currently on the ABA *Checklist* (Pranty et al. 2006), only two have not been accepted by the AOU's committee. Conversely, the AOU *Check-list* includes five species recorded within the ABA Area that have not been accepted by the CLC. Together, the two checklists differ on the treatment of seven species within the ABA Area, representing a greater than 99% agreement ratio. The following seven species represent (or represented until very recently) the differences in species acceptance between the ABA *Checklist* and the AOU's *Check-list of North American Birds*.

- **Light-mantled Albatross.** Accepted by the AOU but until recently relegated by ABA to its Origin Hypothetical list. However, the CLC voted in 2007 to reevaluate the sole record for North America and voted unanimously to accept the record as representing a natural vagrant (Pranty et al. 2007).
- **Fea's Petrel and/or Zino's Petrel.** Accepted as a species-group ("Fea's/Zino's Petrel") by the CLC, but not yet recognized at all by the AOU. The species-group has appeared more than 50 times off our Atlantic coast (mostly off North Carolina), but no specimens have been obtained—and collecting one or more petrels is unlikely to occur given the conservation status of the two species (IUCN 2007). Based on the apparent large bills of many of the petrels (some of which have been well-photographed, e.g., Patteson and Brinkley 2004), the Carolina Bird Club (2007) has accepted the identification of some of these birds as Fea's Petrels. Only once has a bird thought to have been a potential Zino's Petrel been observed in the ABA Area (Patteson and Brinkley 2004). The CLC has asked two experts on Atlantic-coast pelagic birds to formally propose that some of the birds observed in the ABA Area be treated as unquestioned Fea's Petrels so that the CLC might vote to add this species to the *Checklist*. Providing that the CLC ratifies this assessment, then the AOU Check-list Committee would be expected, as a matter of course, to reevaluate the status of

Fea's Petrel off the American Atlantic coast (J. L. Dunn, personal communication).

- **Azure Gallinule.** This species is known from a single record that has a checkered history. The ABA (Gill 1990) and the AOU both accepted as a native vagrant a specimen killed by a cat on Long Island, New York, on 14 December 1986. However, it was later reported that an unidentified "New York ornithologist" informed the CLC that a local aviculturist ("who will remain anonymous") possessed the bird (evidently illegally) and that it escaped a few days before the specimen was found (Dunn et al. 1999). The CLC voted again and elected to remove Azure Gallinule from the ABA *Checklist* (Dunn et al. 1999), but the AOU's committee later voted to retain the species on their *Check-list* (J. L. Dunn, personal communication).
- **African Collared-Dove** (formerly known as Ringed Turtle-Dove). Relegated to the CLC's list of extirpated exotics after being removed from the main part of the ABA *Checklist* (DeBenedictis et al. 1994a) but still accepted by the AOU, based apparently on outdated data. The AOU (Banks et al. 2006) states that African Collared-Doves are "[i]ntroduced and established as feral populations of domesticated stock in west-central Florida (Pinellas County), the Bahamas (New Providence), and Puerto Rico. Other introduced populations in North America have failed to become established." However, the African Col-



**African Collared-Dove**, widely known as Ringed Turtle-Dove, is treated by the ABA *Checklist* as an extirpated exotic, and has therefore been removed from the main body of the *Checklist*. However, the species is still considered by the AOU *Check-list* to be established in the ABA Area. St. Petersburg, Florida; 16 December 1989. © Bill Pranty.

lared-Dove population at St. Petersburg, Pinellas County, Florida, has not been observed since 1999 (Pranty in preparation), and the populations on Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands survive in a "semi-domesticated state" but are not established (Raffaele et al. 1998).

- **European Turtle-Dove.** Accepted by the AOU but until re-

cently relegated by the ABA to its Origin Hypothetical list. However, the species was reevaluated by the CLC in late 2006, partially in response to a recent specimen record from Massachusetts (Veit 2006), and has been unanimously added to the ABA *Checklist* as a native vagrant.

- **Mitred Parakeet.** Accepted recently by the AOU (Banks et al. 2002) as an established exotic based on a population of an estimated 680 individuals in the greater Los Angeles, California, area of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties (Garrett 1997). The population had increased to an estimated 1,000 parakeets by 2002 (Garrett and Mabb 2002, Pranty and Garrett 2003), but the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) still has not yet voted to ratify this population. Another non-ratified population of perhaps 300 Mitred Parakeets is found in the Fort Lauderdale and Miami, Florida, metropolitan areas (Pranty and Garrett 2003). The CLC prefers to wait until the Mitred Parakeet is ratified by the CBRC before voting on the species' establishment; the AOU's committee has no such policy.



**Mitred Parakeet** is treated by the AOU *Check-list* as established in the ABA Area. The species does not appear on the ABA *Checklist*, however, because no state or provincial records committee has accepted it. *Orange County, California; January.* © Loretta Erickson and Mike Bowles / amazornia.us.

- **Caribbean Elaenia.** Accepted by the ABA but not the AOU, based on a bird photographed at Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida, 28 April 1984. This record initially was accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (Powell 1986) but was removed from the official Florida list some time later (FOSRC 2007; there is no published record of this deletion). The record was not accepted by Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) but accepted by Stevenson and Anderson (1994). The record involves a singing bird (an unquestioned elaenia) that was photographed but not audio-recorded; hence the identification to species based on the photograph was “only 99% positive” (Gill et al. 1985). Note that although



Although the **Caribbean Elaenia** appears on the ABA *Checklist*, it is not treated by the AOU *Check-list* as having occurred in the ABA Area. In this particular instance, the two committees have reached conflicting determinations as to the identification of the single record from North America. *Pensacola, Florida; 28 April 1984.* © Robert Duncan.

the AOU does not consider the Florida record to be definitive, the Caribbean Elaenia is included in the AOU *Check-list* on the basis of records in the West Indies.

Recent decisions by the CLC have narrowed the differences between the ABA *Checklist* and the AOU's *Check-list of North American Birds* to five species, and this number may be reduced further once the AOU's committee votes on some of the CLC's recent decisions.

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