

A Birding Interview with **Richard C. Banks**

Richard C. (“Dick”) Banks, a member of the American Ornithologists’ Union Committee on Classification and Nomenclature (the “*Check-list* Committee”) since 1971 (Chairman, 1995–2007) and president of the AOU in 1994–1996, is well regarded for his extensive contributions to our understanding of the systematics, distribution, and geographic variation of North American birds. He has authored more than 150 publications, including *Ornithological Nomenclature*, the preface to volume 9 of *Handbook of Birds of the World*. During his career, Banks has been a strong voice for conservation, regulation of the U.S. pet bird trade, the importance of museum collections, and involvement of scientists in public policy-making. Formerly Chief of the Bird Project in the Biological Resource Division of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Banks is now a USGS Emeritus Research Zoologist and Research Associate at the National Museum of Natural History.

In this *Birding* interview, Banks weighs in on lumping and splitting, on the chances of discovering a new bird species in the U.S., and on the possibility—after a 50-year wait—of a new AOU *Check-list* with subspecies.

Noah K. Strycker

Birding: What’s in a name?

Richard Banks: Nothing, really. Names are basically pigeonholes where we can store information about a particular species. Some names, either English or scientific, are intended to be descriptive or to indicate relationships, but they can be misleading. One might think that Lark, Snow, and Lazuli Buntings are closely related but they are in quite different groups. Many group names, such as bunting, finch, and sparrow are very old words that probably at one time applied to single species but through time were attached to other species that seemed generally to be similar.

Birding: What is the purpose of the *Check-list*? Why is it always being revised? Why does the AOU change bird names? Why don’t the AOU and ABA checklists agree?

RB: The *Check-list* is intended to provide a nomenclaturally accurate list of the species of birds known to occur, or to have occurred, in North and Middle America and Hawaii. It is revised as new information becomes available—information on distribution, nomenclature, and relationships of the birds. We try not to change names, and generally do so only when there is a valid scientific reason. Even when we have to change scientific names, we try not to change English names. The ABA and AOU lists are in full agreement on names, although they differ in area covered. The ABA follows the AOU’s scientific lead, and there is overlap in committee membership. Incidentally, a lot of people probably think of the *Check-list* as the online list of names, or a field list to be “ticked,” but to me it is an 800-page book last published in 1998.

Birding: There was a lot of lumping of species in the 1970s and then splitting seemed to become more frequent. What’s happening?

RB: Several studies on hybridization led to an overemphasis of that phenomenon in the biological species concept into the 1970s. Then we began to realize that limited hybridization in a stabilized zone is compatible with species distinctness, and data were reinterpreted. This is what happened with the Baltimore-Bullock’s-Northern Orioles, probably the most widely known example. Now DNA work is revealing new information on relationships that is leading to more splitting. Recognition of larger and smaller species of Canada Geese was based on genetic work, although that is not all there is to it; there are important physiological differences, too.

Birding: Is the AOU considering modifications to the boundaries of the *Check-list* area?

RB: We plan to bring Greenland back into the *Check-list* area with the next edition. It was included through the fifth edition, then dropped for the sixth and seventh. Geographically, Greenland is part of North America, and although its avifauna is largely Old World, its inclusion adds only a few species to our list.

Birding: What are the chances of discovering more new species (*novae aves*) in the U.S. (like the Gunnison Sage-Grouse in 2000)?

RB: I think the chances of something new like that are slim to none. One—a goose—has recently been suggested, but not validly proposed, and I doubt that it will be accepted. It's mentioned in a book that terribly "oversplits" the Canada Goose. However, a number of taxa now considered to be subspecies will probably be recognized as species in the near future, and some of these may be surprising. A lot of these were considered species in past times, however, and will not be as surprising. Many will be east-west splits like the Eastern and Spotted Towhees—which birders will remember from the 1990s. There is a list of about a dozen species in which two samples are said have different DNA readings, but full datasets have not been published, to my knowledge. We need a lot more information than that.

Birding: Are there sometimes strong feelings and heated disagreements among members of the *Check-list* Committee? What was the most difficult decision the committee has made under your leadership?

RB: When the scientific evidence is available, there is seldom any disagreement on accepting it. We have had no heated disagreements. The major differences are about whether the evidence presented is sufficient for change. As a group we are extremely conservative, preferring to maintain the *status quo* until proven otherwise. Some of the most difficult problems have been agreeing on new English names when they are needed. We had a hard time agreeing

on the sharp-tailed sparrows when they were split. We wanted to keep the "sharp-tailed" part to show relationships, but didn't want the final names to be so long. As birders know, we decided we had to use the extra modifiers. The committee remains uneasy about these names, however, and it is possible the two sharp-tailed sparrows will be renamed once again.

Birding: What was the most interesting avian taxonomic problem you have wrestled with in your career?

RB: The most interesting may be the one I have not finished yet, a long study of variation in and nomenclature of

Greater White-fronted Geese. I hit a wall in my analysis of data on about a thousand specimens, mostly wintering or migrating birds, some time ago and have not gotten back to the project. One problem is that size variation is extensive and smooth on a worldwide basis, with no peaks or breaks. Also, many older papers have serious taxonomic errors.

Birding: How has avian taxonomy changed over the past 50 years, and how will the field change in the next 50 years?

RB: Over the past 50 years, avian taxonomy has drifted from a focus on subspecific variation to higher-level problems. I suspect that the trend will continue, at least for a while; DNA lends itself to studies at that level. DNA studies are suggesting unsuspected

relationships of families and orders, such as placing flamingos and grebes as close relatives.

Birding: You have advocated that scientific ornithologists take a greater role in public affairs. How can ornithologists affect public policy?

RB: Like other citizens, ornithologists should maintain an awareness of issues that affect them and their work, plus the objects they work on. They can give knowledgeable comments based on science (rather than emotion) in conversations with and in letters to policymakers. Individual-



Richard C. ("Dick") Banks. Photograph by © Joy Gold.

ly, we cannot do much. That is why some years ago I advocated the formation of the Ornithological Council (OC), so that all the professional ornithological societies might work together to present a science-based viewpoint to those who need one—even if they don't know they need it. One way we can all help is to support the OC financially, and to be sure that our societies continue their support.

Birding: It has been more than 50 years since the AOU published a *Check-list* with subspecies. When will we get another?

RB: Members of the committee began working on a new subspecies edition as soon as the sixth edition came out in 1983. We had dropped subspecies for that edition because we added all of Middle America to our geographic coverage, and that greatly increased the number of species that we didn't know much about. Many of us worked on subspecies until the early '90s, and nearly half the subspecies accounts were drafted. Work on subspecies since the early '90s has been minimal. Recently, the committee has added some members who are particularly interested in the subspecies level, and work in that area is increasing. It will probably be some time before an entire volume comes out, but I think we will see some subspecies accounts in some format fairly soon.

Birding: Were you always interested in museum ornithology?

RB: I became interested in birds as an early teen, and was soon exposed to collecting and specimen preparation. It was not until graduate school, when I was a curatorial assistant at Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, that I really felt at home in a museum collection and decided that was what I wanted to do.