

A Birding Interview with **Bill Pranty**

Under the leadership of Bill Pranty, the ABA Checklist Committee (CLC) has been very active the past four years, adding 26 species to the *ABA Checklist* and removing three others. The CLC also recently published the seventh edition of its *ABA Checklist*. A skilled field ornithologist and prolific writer, Pranty has worked as a biologist in northern and central Florida, he compiles and publishes bird observations in *Florida Field Naturalist*, he coordinated Audubon of Florida's Important Bird Areas program, he edits the state's Christmas Bird Counts, and he is a technical reviewer for *Birding*. He has authored or coauthored more than 200 articles on Florida's avifauna as well as three books, including *A Birder's Guide to Florida* and *Birds of Florida*. He is especially interested in documenting Florida's rare birds, native as well as exotic.

In this thoughtful interview, Pranty remembers tough committee decisions, elaborates on current exotic species, and predicts one of the next ABA Area vagrants.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: What is the purpose of having two checklists: the *ABA Checklist* and the American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list of North American Birds*?

Bill Pranty: Although the primary goal of each committee is to document the avifauna recorded within each geographic region, there are differences between the two committees. Mainly, the AOU *Check-list* area encompasses a much larger region, and the AOU's committee is involved with several topics in addition to documenting the status and distribution of species, which is our primary purpose. The *ABA Checklist* is a semi-annotated checklist useful for listing purposes, while the AOU *Check-list* is wholly annotated and the recognized authority for the birds of North and Middle America. The ABA produces checklists more frequently than the AOU.

Birding: What guiding principles do you follow in making classification decisions?

BP: The CLC no longer makes any decisions relating to nomenclature (the naming of birds) or taxonomy (their evolutionary placement). We leave the "real" science to AOU's committee, while we concentrate on refining the status and distribution of the birds of the ABA Area, which comprises Canada, the continental U.S., the French islands of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon, and offshore waters up to 200 miles from shore or half the water distance to a neighboring country, whichever is less.

Birding: What type of documentation is required for the CLC to add a species to the *ABA Checklist*?

BP: For all species, native and exotic, we follow the AOU's committee in requiring a specimen or one or more photographs or audio or video recordings of unquestioned identification and provenance. We used to but no longer accept sight reports as a means of adding a species to the *ABA Checklist*. Exotic species must also pass six other criteria (published in the seventh edition of the *ABA Checklist*) to be ratified as established.

Birding: During your time as chairman, what has been the committee's toughest decision?

BP: Because nearly every record that we review has previously undergone local review, most of our votes are to accept. The difficult votes, three thus far during my tenure, arise when the CLC rejects a record that was accepted by a local committee. First, the CLC did not accept any recent reports of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, even the 2004 published record accepted by the Arkansas Audubon Society Bird Records Committee. Then we rejected ratification of the Black-hooded Parakeet as an established exotic after it was accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee. That vote was a bit awkward for me, since it was one of my publications that added the parakeet to the Florida list! But I understood the concerns of the two members who voted "no." I suspect that the Black-hooded Para-

keet will be added to the *ABA Checklist* eventually, provided that its range and numbers continue to increase in Florida. The *really* awkward record, from Texas, concerned an animal (never seen) recorded while it vocalized at night. It wasn't until the next day that others identified the sound as that of a Barred Antshrike, a resident from Mexico to Argentina. The Texas Bird Records Committee accepted the record 8–1, while the CLC rejected it 2–6.

Birding: What would the committee consider irrefutable evidence to change the status of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker from Code 6 (“cannot be found”) to Code 3 (“rare”)?

BP: The same evidence required to add a species to the *ABA Checklist*—a photograph or video recording of unquestioned identification and provenance. I doubt that an audio recording would be sufficient. I suspect that we would also accept definitive DNA analysis of a recently shed feather, eggshell, or bone found in a cavity. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker obviously represents an impassioned and complicated case because several observers, some associated with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, have claimed that the species persists in several regions of the southeastern U.S. But all the evidence presented to date has been problematic in one way or another and has been met with widespread doubt.

Although the CLC has agreed informally that none of the evidence gathered to date is indisputable, we have not yet formally voted on any of the recent reports of Ivory-billed Woodpecker persistence. One reason for no formal vote is that surveys for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers continue, and we don't want to vote “no” and then have to revote a few months later if additional evidence surfaces. Another reason is that we already consider the Ivory-billed Woodpecker to be “probably extinct,” so we're not going to vote unless we believe that the species persists—and based on available evidence, none of us believes that it does.

Birding: What are the committee's plans for adding more exotic species to the *Checklist* (besides the 18 already on the list)?

BP: Our policy is to wait until a local committee has ratified an exotic species as established in its state or province before we vote to add it to the *ABA Checklist*. That way we take advantage of local knowledge, and we don't appear to be ignoring or overstepping the local committees, primarily those in California and Florida. During my six-year tenure on the CLC, we have added one exotic (Common Myna in Florida), we rejected adding another (Black-hooded Parakeet in Florida), we deleted Crested Myna because all populations are now extirpated, and we removed Yellow-chevroned Parakeet because no local committee had ratified it. I'll predict that

the Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) will be the next exotic added to the *ABA Checklist*, once it is ratified by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee, probably in 2013 or 2014. I hope that the California Bird Records Committee will soon take an active role in determining how many more exotic birds found in California deserve ratification. No exotic bird from California has been added to the *ABA Checklist* since 1975, despite robust populations of Mitred Parakeets, Lilac-crowned Parrots, Orange Bishops, and Nutmeg Mannikins. I believe the Arizona Bird Committee is monitoring the growing population of Peach-faced Lovebirds in the greater Phoenix area.



Bill Pranty. Photo by © Eva Dupuis.

Birding: Why should birders pay attention to exotic species—whether or not they're officially countable?

BP: Most birders (and ornithologists for that matter) don't pay attention to exotics, and this attitude results in numerous lost opportunities. For example, *Aratinga* parakeets in Florida probably represent one of the greatest identification challenges on the continent, but nobody's studying them. Exotic birds seem to be a permanent fixture of our avifauna, and we need to know much more about the effects—if any—that they have on native species and habitats, agriculture and animal husbandry, and human health and commerce. And we can't learn about something unless we study it. Plus, many exotic birds in the ABA Area are stunning animals (see photo, p. 20), and to ignore them because “they don't belong here” is just plain silly. Fortunately, exotic birds in the ABA



Sun Parakeets (*Aratinga solstitialis*), native to northeastern Brazil and southern Guyana. Pasco County, Florida; 22 July 2009. © Bill Pranty.

Area seem largely benign, unlike many exotic plants and non-avian vertebrates, although there are some notable avian exceptions.

Birding: What have you learned from studying Monk Parakeets in Florida? Can your findings with this species be generalized to other exotic species and other areas of the U.S.?

BP: Monks are scrappy little birds that have become established (where permitted) in many urban areas of the world, but, no, they cannot be used as a model for other birds. Each species behaves differently in its new and foreign environment. Monk Parakeets are the only parrots—in a family of more than 350 species—that build their own nests, and Monks use these nests year-round for roosting, as opposed to other parrots that nest in cavities and roost primarily in vegetation the rest of the year. We can't use one species of parrot to predict how various species of waterfowl, gamebirds, or finches are going to behave.

Birding: What do you think will be some of the next new species added to the *ABA Checklist*?

BP: Considering that we're generally bad at predicting avian vagrancy (see, for instance, the "next new birds" series published in *Birding*, 1998–2000), I'm hesitant to say too much. But I will predict that an unquestionably wild Southern Lapwing will be found in the ABA Area, perhaps along the western Gulf of Mexico, within the next eight years.

Birding: You're not a fan of listing?

BP: I have nothing against keeping lists—I keep several of my own. But I don't like the *single-minded obsession*—not to mention the braggadocio—that many listers associate with listing. I'd like to see us all concerned with the carbon footprint that we're creating every time we go birding, to greatly curtail use of iPods and other digital sound devices when used for rarities or territorial birds, and to remember that the ABA Code of Birding Ethics applies to *all of us*—photographers included.