
Christopher Swarth, Newsletter Editor
[https://westernfieldornithologists.org/](https://westernfieldornithologists.org/)
Year-end Appeal to WFO Members

This indeed has been an extraordinary year, like none that any of us have ever experienced. The deadly pandemic has affected all of us and we hope that you have managed to stay safe and well. 2020 was to be our 50th anniversary and we had great plans to celebrate this milestone in Reno. It was not to be, but we are very hopeful that we can gather there and celebrate together next August. As we assess our year-end financial balance, the loss of anticipated income from the lack of a conference and expeditions has left us with a net loss of about $20,000. WFO has husbanded its resources well, so while the situation is not dire, we feel it necessary and prudent to ask for your support. It is important for our membership to know that your dues alone do not fully support the publication of our flagship quarterly journal, *Western Birds*. With the announced vaccines, we are hoping to get back to “normal” by the middle of next year, in advance of the Reno conference. **But now, it is critical that we ask you to make a year-end donation to support WFO.**

Like most similar organizations, WFO experienced significant handicaps; but we were not idle and looked for ways to communicate with our membership, even without a conference. The WFO Board met by telephone in March and developed an ambitious program to address the new conditions related to the pandemic. We began with a greatly expanded newsletter which included contributions from students and older members. Chris Swarth stepped up as editor and the December issue will be our 4th. Our students conducted monthly Zoom webinars and meetings to maintain communication among this group of budding ornithologists. Work is nearing completion on another Special Publication, *Birds of Inyo County* by Tom and Jo Heindel. Our website has been completely redesigned and work continues to make the site more useful to members. Phil Unitt continues to ably edit *Western Birds* as he done for over three decades. Phil has greatly expanded the content from those early volumes, and has added many color photos to the articles, as well as to the covers.

While we felt it necessary to increase member dues beginning in 2021, dues can be renewed at the current rate before the end of 2020 and we guaranteed that rate for up to five years. We encourage Life Members to consider becoming Patrons. Though Patron status gives no extra benefits, this will give you the satisfaction of helping us get through this difficult time and help to ensure a healthy financial future. Beyond giving a donation, another thing that will help us is for you to purchase one of the WFO Special Publications on our website. This will raise needed funds and will reduce our inventory!

In the meantime, please stay safe and we hope we see all of you for a real (not virtual!) 50th anniversary celebration in Reno in August 2021. **We hope you will join this effort by the entire Board by supporting WFO at this time, and we’re grateful for your previous support.**

You can donate via our [website](#) or send a tax-deductible check payable to: Western Field Ornithologists to 3476 Armourdale Ave, Long Beach, CA 90808.

Sincerely,

Jon L. Dunn, President
John Harris, Vice President
Alaska: Purple Martins are primarily casual long-distance-migrant overshoots to Alaska during the late spring and early summer. Unprecedented were 2+ birds found during autumn 2020 at three different sites. First, two birds were found on Middleton Island 26-28 Sep, followed by two birds in Seward from 5-9+ Oct, and then two birds at Homer on 23-24 Oct. Photo analysis shows that the birds in Seward and Homer (83 miles apart as the martin might fly) were, in fact, the same individuals. Alaska’s first Song Thrush was photographed at Utqiagvik (Barrow) on 9 Oct. The only previous North America record is from Quebec. In Asia, this species breeds east only to the vicinity of Lake Baikal. Covid-19 concerns led to the closure of almost all Alaska outpost sites this season to visiting birders.

Nonetheless, a Eurasian Bullfinch at Gambell on 14 Oct was that site’s third in fall, and a Little Bunting there on 28 Oct was the latest of now over 40 local records, all but one in fall. In Southeast Alaska, a Brewer’s Sparrow was found 17-20 Oct and the state’s sixth Indigo Bunting was present 12-15 Nov, both in Ketchikan. (Thede Tobish, Steve Heinl)
British Columbia: It says something about the quality of the fall when the provincial (and Canadian) first Common Pochard in Victoria from 8-27 Nov and the provincial-first nominate Bell's Vireo at Saanich from 6-21 Sep play a somewhat distant second-fiddle to the province’s first, and North America’s second, Red-backed Shrike enjoyed by many at Powell River, northwest of Vancouver, from 22-30 Oct. A Nazca Booby was found off Galiano Island on 27 Sep, but the record may be accepted as only a Masked/Nazca Booby; there are two previous records of Nazca. A Red-legged Kittiwake was found at Deep Bay, also on 27 Sep, by a few lucky observers—the second record for BC. A Prairie Warbler in Vernon from 27 Oct-13 Nov was the 5th record for the province. (Melissa Hafting)
**Washington:** A Nazca Booby near Seattle on 14 Aug was a “sight-only” first for Washington, whereas a Wedge-tailed Shearwater in inland marine waters in Skagit County on 23 Aug was photo’d for the third state record. A state-second Yellow-throated Vireo was in Spokane County on 6 Sep, and the third Prairie Warbler was in Thurston County on 3 Nov. (Brad Waggoner)

**Oregon:** Although lackluster spring and summer seasons may have allowed Oregon birders to set aside some extra gas money and family time, those banked surpluses surely evaporated during September and October. Fall 2020 produced three first state records, including a 16 Sep Yellow-bellied Flycatcher at Fields, Harney County, an Arctic-type Warbler (no vocalizations) at Goose Lake State Park, Lake County on 19 Sep, and an Oriental Greenfinch seen sporadically at Florence, Lane County 17-19 Oct. On 26 Sep, just a week after the first, a second Arctic-type Warbler was photographed along Siletz Bay, Lincoln County. A Wood Sandpiper at Ankeny N.W.R., Marion County 15-24 Oct and a Cassin’s Sparrow near Eugene, Lane County 20-26 Oct also represented second state records. Other September highlights included Oregon’s 6th Yellow-throated and Philadelphia Vireos, it’s 6th LeConte’s Sparrow, plus the 9th Black-headed Gull, as well as a better-than-average showing of the more expected “eastern” warblers. A high-elevation Vermilion Flycatcher (seventh state record) was at Lost Lake, Linn County (4,000 ft.) on 28 Oct. This ranks among Oregon’s best-ever fall rarity seasons. (David Irons, Shawneen Finnegan)
California: A Bean-Goose was in Sacramento County on 14-15 Nov. Up to two separate Hudsonian Godwits at the south end of Salton Sea on 10-11 Oct were exceptional in fall for southern CA. Apparently wintering Curlew Sandpipers were in Santa Barbara and Kings Counties, and a Little Stint was back in San Diego for its third winter. The long-staying, sporadic Black-tailed Gull continued off and on at Southeast Farallon Island. Single Ruddy Ground Doves made it to the coastal slope in San Bernardino and San Diego Counties, both on 15 Oct. Casual in the state, a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher delighted many in Long Beach from 21-24 Sept. An Arctic/Kamchatka Leaf Warbler was in Orange County 20 Sep. A Eurasian Skylark at Lake Talawa, Del Norte County, 3 Nov was presumably the same individual back for at least its third year. San Luis Obispo County hosted a Common Ringed Plover from 1-7 Oct and both a Streak-backed Oriole and a Field Sparrow during Nov. A “Yellow” Palm Warbler in San Diego during Nov through early Dec was a casual visitor. Surprisingly large numbers of both Broad-billed Hummingbirds and White Wagtails were found, with as many as ten of the former (north to Sonoma County) and approximately seven of the latter reported during the period. (Paul Lehman, Curtis Marantz)
Montana: An immature Heermann’s Gull was at Flathead Lake from 11-14 Oct, a second state record. Montana’s 11th Pine Warbler was at a Red Lodge feeder on 29 Nov. A Summer Tanager was in Madison County 31 Oct. (Jeff Marks)

Nevada: The long-awaited first state record of Pine Warbler was established by a bird in Henderson on 22-23 Oct. Nevada’s fourth Snow Bunting was in Churchill County 5 Nov, and a Ruddy Ground Dove appeared at Lake Mead on 13 Nov. (Martin Meyers)
Arizona: A juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in Yuma County 29 Oct was the state’s seventh. Two separate Upland Sandpipers were discovered on 20 Aug, one in Tucson and one in Marana. Two Ruffs were discovered in late Sep-early Oct. Two different Northern Jacanas included one in the Green Valley/Canoa Ranch area from 8-11 Sep and another, long staying, in Tucson from 26 Sep-1+ Dec. These establish the sixth and seventh records for the state. A Common Crane at Willcox 27-28 Nov may or may not have the been the same bird that was present about a week earlier in Idaho. The continuing duo of Eared Quetzals in the Chiricahua Mountains moved to Cave Creek Canyon in mid-Sep, where at least the male was still present in late Nov. A calling Eastern Wood-Pewee was at Parker on 22 Oct, the state’s eighth. An overall excellent season for vagrants in the state resulted in a staggering 38 species of wood-warblers found. One Blue-winged Warbler, three Canada Warblers, and 3 Field Sparrows were some of the standout eastern passerines. A bumper crop of 50+ Ruddy Ground Doves and 24+ Rufous-backed Robins statewide was exceptional. (Gary Rosenberg)


Northern Jacana. Canoa Ranch near Green Valley, AZ. 9 Sep 2020. Photo/ Patricia Isaacson
Colorado: A state-first Ruddy Ground Dove frequented a yard in the western part of the state in Norwood from 17 Oct-14 Nov.

New Mexico: A European Golden-Plover on the high plains at Maxwell NWR 28 Sep-25 Oct was a first for interior North America. Two Eared Quetzals in the Pinos Altos Mountains north of Silver City 20 Aug-25 Oct provided the first photo-documented state record. After a decade of scarcity, a Ruddy Ground Dove incursion was underway by 22 Oct and by 30 Nov there were multiple reports, some involving multiple birds, from at least five locales in the southwest and Rio Grande Valley. A remarkable three Great Kiskadees were documented, including one far north to Taos County at Valdez that was enjoyed by many, 10 Oct-15 Nov; the others were at Carlsbad 21 Oct and in the lower Rio Grande Valley 12-15 Nov. Remarkably early and far south of expected, a Common Redpoll visited an Albuquerque feeder 3-5 Oct and then it (or another) turned up to the south at a Bosque del Apache NWR feeder for a single day on 7 Oct. With only a single previous record, Nelson’s Sparrow had been considered accidental in the state, until this season when singles were photographed at wetlands in two counties, one at Santa Rosa’s Tres Lagunas 7-9 Oct and another at Ute Lake 9-11 Oct. (Sandy Williams)


Nelson’s Sparrow. near Santa Rosa, NM. 7-9 Oct 2020. Photo/ Jonathan P. Batkin
Meet Karen Havlena: WFO Board Member

Home town(s) - Hermosa Beach and Palos Verdes Estates, CA.
Education - BA and MFA from University of California, Irvine.
Real life - Now retired in Reno, NV. I was a bank auditor and an accountant who worked for former husband and now friend, WFO member Jim Havlena.

Early birding - My father grew up on Galveston Island, Texas, and knew large wading birds fairly well. My earliest bird memories in Galveston are of the Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Reddish Egret, Little Blue Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, and watching Black Skimmers flying by on the Gulf coast (no need for binoculars for these). In Hermosa Beach, I remember my mother being angry at Cedar Waxwings and Northern Mockingbirds for attacking and eating the red berries on her Pyracantha bush. We had a spotting scope in the living room in Palos Verdes Estates, and my dad once pointed out an Osprey hovering above the water just offshore.

In the early 1970s at UC Irvine, I birded at nearby San Joaquin Marsh, which was mostly undeveloped at that time. A male Yellow-headed Blackbird singing atop a cattail was a joy to encounter. Early 1980s Orange County, CA, had me taking many birding workshops from my mentor and long-time WFO member, Sylvia Ranney Gallagher of Sea & Sage Audubon. I loved reading her trip journals.

During the time prior to the internet, I managed the Morro Bay Rare Bird Alert phone line for 9-1/2 years before handing it over to Jim Royer. Christmas Bird Counts (CAMR) were always fun, with lunchtime meetings at the late John McDonald's, and then at Celeste and Jim Royer's home. In 1987 at the McDonald's CBC lunch, I announced that I'd found a Red-naped Sapsucker, which was new to the count. I was quite nervous when Jon Dunn said to me, "I'd like to see that sapsucker." I was so afraid that I'd made a mistake and that the bird was a hybrid. That night at the compilation, Jon told me that "indeed" it was a pure Red-naped Sapsucker and a San Luis Obispo County bird for him. Whew! During this period, the late Art Cupples told me about WFO, so I joined.

After 21 years in Los Osos, in 2005 we moved to Mendocino County. For several years I was on the Mendocino County Bird Records Committee with Bob Keiffer, Ron LeValley, Dorothy Tobkin, Jerry White, and Chuck Vaughn. I removed quite a few invalid species from the 1970s Manchester CBC records working with Geoff LeBaron over the phone: not an easy task. (For example, Hepatic Tanager had never been recorded in MEN, but it was on very old "CBC records" from the mid-1970s, and there was NO documentation to be found).

In late November 2015, a beautiful Snow Bunting arrived at MacKerricher State Park. There, I met Diane and Steve Rose. Diane had recently joined the WFO Board of Directors. Later that afternoon, Jon Dunn drove in from visiting friends in Oregon. The four of us birded together the next day along the Mendocino coast. In 2016, Jon asked me to run for the WFO Board and join my friend Diane. I was elected at the Fortuna conference that September.
Meet Jon Dunn: WFO Board Member

Everyone has their own story of how they came into the birding world. I was always interested in nature and animals, mammals in particular. But the ones I wanted to see weren’t available. I grew up in the Los Angeles area. My dad, Lloyd Dunn, was one of the vice presidents of Capitol Records. His claim to fame was perhaps making the executive decision to release a single in 1963 from a new group from the United Kingdom. Capitol had been asked by their parent company, EMI, to release it as favor. The “talent” people at Capitol felt this new group was going nowhere and even offered to play the record for him. My dad didn’t want to hear it, didn’t care, he just ordered its release. The song was, “I Want to Hold your Hand,” and for those of our age, I don’t think I need to name the group!

My spark bird was a bird of our garden, an adult male Hooded Oriole. I didn’t know what it was and wanted to find out. There were binoculars around the house. They were primarily for my mother who was suffering severe macular degeneration. My interest resulted in my parents buying me a bird book, Peterson’s Western Field Guide. While I believe I identified it correctly at the time I was confused by the bird I saw which was more yellow than orange. The bird illustrated was orange. Turns out that Peterson was illustrating sennetti from southern Texas, not nelsoni from California and Arizona. It was the spring of 1962 and I was seven, nearly eight. Had my parents really loved me they would have taken me to Galveston, Texas, to see perhaps the last Eskimo Curlew, then to Charleston, South Carolina, to see perhaps the last Bachman’s Warbler. They didn’t, but I got over it.

My interest in birds greatly accelerated when my dad drove me to a San Fernando Valley Audubon field trip to Descanso Gardens. It was led by Arthur Langton, Sr. From then on I was lost to the birds. It is interesting how various events in one’s life are one of chance. On the 2nd of December 1967 I was on a Los Angeles Audubon field trip to the Carrizo Plains. That evening in California Valley at dinner a teenager walked into the restaurant with his dad. Once I discovered he was a birder we asked them to join us. I learned that he had seen a Ferruginous Hawk there before dusk. I was skeptical and questioned him. The next day we saw six! The person I had questioned was Kimball L. Garrett. He got over my rude conduct and we became friends, later essentially life-long colleagues. He birded in the Hollywood Hills, I birded Encino in the San Fernando Valley.

On a cross-country trip in 1971 with friends we stayed at the home of Will and Maude Russell. A few years later Will and Davis Finch started a bird touring company, Northeast Birding (later the name changed to Wings), and in 1977 I was invited to co-lead my first tour for them. I still lead tours for Wings. Most of those trips are in North America, but I have developed a passion for Asian birds and love my near annual visits to Thailand. I also have greatly enjoyed my many trips to Cuba.

On 1 October 1979 after a trip to Attu Island with a small group, Thede Tobish, Lisa Oakley and I, drove up to the Fairbanks area to meet Daniel D. Gibson, an icon of Alaska ornithology who had published many peer-reviewed articles. We spent two evenings with Dan and his wife, Jennifer Jolis, as well as with Brian Lawhead and Robert Day. Dan has had a major impact on my life, particularly on the issues of verifiable evidence and scientific writing. Dan makes me think of Joe Friday, “just the facts, mam.” He knows all of the intricacies of the AOU/AOS and their 134 years of history and Dan is my “go to” person for information. Earlier that fall I met a woman from Washington,
D.C., who was working on a new North American field guide by the National Geographic Society. Her name was Claudia Wilds. She was visiting well-known birders across the country and was soliciting advice on identification clues for difficult species. We spent three days together going over material. The following summer she had a major falling out with the head of the project for NGS and she resigned. They asked her whom should they hire as a replacement? She recommended me and so I joined the project in September of 1980. The first edition of that field guide appeared in 1983 and we are up to our 7th (2017). In the mid-1990’s, Jonathan Alderfer joined the effort and we have worked closely together on all editions after the 2nd, as well as working on other written projects, too.

Somewhere around 1996, I received a draft manuscript of the 7th edition of the AOU Check-List. I reviewed the distribution sections. Six weeks later, I had managed to get through half of it and had 30 single-spaced pages of comments. Once it was published, I was contacted by the Chair, Richard Banks, in 1999, about joining their Check-list Committee as their distributional “expert.” I joined in 2000 and am still a member. The other members all have advanced degrees in ornithology. I have an undergraduate degree in political science with a minor in history. Those are my hobbies now. This means every square inch of my house in Rovana, near Bishop, California, is filled with books! Truth be told, I found these non-ornithological subjects easy to master, but biology, math, physics, and chemistry, were not subjects I thought I could easily tackle, or tackle at all! My main interest was birding! While taking liberal arts classes at San Diego State University in the early and mid-1970’s, I was birding constantly, much of the time with Guy McCaskie and Phil Unitt. We each choose our own life paths. Other than the AOS Check-list Committee, I’ve served 30 years on the California Bird Records Committee. It should be noted that Guy McCaskie has served many more years.

An important part of my life goes back to 1969. In an English class we were asked to select 10 poems and write precis on them. Three could be songs. I selected a song from Judy Collins “Wildflowers” album, “Hey, that’s no way to say goodbye.” I discovered that it was written by Leonard Cohen and it was about his most significant muse, a Norwegian woman, Marianne Ihlen. They lived together for much of the 1960s on the idyllic Greek Aegean Island, Hydra. One British reviewer of Cohen’s work said it was good music to “slit your wrists to.” My view differed.

As we age, I guess I’m not unique in remembering my early years well, but the last year, the last decades (!) are not remembered with clarity. What I can remember is having a mentor, having someone treat you with kindness, more importantly giving you respect is so important. Kimball Garrett was very important in my self-development. Pete Petersen from Davenport, Iowa, was hugely influential. He ran a banding operation at a Pine Hill Cemetery. He picked me up every morning and we banded birds. It was the fall of 1968. He eventually had enough confidence in me that he allowed me on my own to remove, identify, measure, record, and release birds. In retrospect, I’m not sure that was a great idea, but I sure remember that first Connecticut Warbler we banded on 10 Sept. 1968.

The next fall (1969) I received an invitation to join a new organization devoted to field ornithology. It was to be called California Field Ornithologists. I signed up. The first issue of California Birds was released early in 1970. Three years later the name of the group was changed to Western Field Ornithologists and our journal was changed to Western Birds.

I have lived much of my life in southern California (currently near Bishop, CA), except for an eight-year stint near Dayton, Ohio. The Midwest is particularly beautiful in the spring when all of the spring migrants arrive, including my favorite species, the Cerulean Warbler. It was an eight-hour drive to Washington, D.C., and the Smithsonian Institution where Kimball and I researched their collection of wood warblers for a forthcoming book.

In recent years one of my greatest satisfactions is the crew of new young birders that WFO and other organizations foster. I think of my own early years and the various pivotal steps along the way, our own journeys. I would urge that everyone do what they can to mentor these young birders. Give them sound advice, but also treat them with the kindness and respect they deserve. Their future, our future, depends on it.
Meet Diane Rose: WFO Board Member

Harassed and stressed by demanding physicians who wanted lab test results faster than STAT, I was delighted when a friend invited my husband, Steve, and I to Point Pelee, Ontario in early May. Our first day birding and we were like kids in a candy shop. Every yellow bird was a potential warbler, every sparrow was worth looking at, and every noise was new. There were bright red birds with black wings, gorgeous orange birds, Great Crested Flycatchers, Brown Thrashers and every bird was singing. In a day, we got to see nearly 50 species and we were both smitten. At no time while birding did I think of anything but birds. What a wonderful relief!

During the week, we studied bird identification and in the next weeks we went back to Point Pelee time and again, ready to identify everything. We found a Henslow’s Sparrow squirming in the grass at our feet and Hooded Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats, Gray Catbirds and by the end of spring, nearly 30 species of warblers including Ovenbird, Hooded, Kentucky, Mourning, and Cerulean. What a fairyland!

A birder we passed on a trail at Point Pelee seemed to be obsessed with finding a bird. I asked about it and he said he heard a Blue-winged Warbler. I said I didn’t know what that sounded like thinking he would give me a clue. He said nothing and walked away. That night, I listened to the vinyl record I had of Birds of North America and heard the Blue-winged Warbler for the first time. To this day, I still remember its song. However, the first bird I ever tracked down because I knew its sound was a Yellow-breasted Chat. That single chat experience made me want to learn other songs and track those songsters down. Soon, we were finding lots of birds by their sounds, frequently finding more than 100 species in a day.

We moved back to California from Michigan and met Richard Webster in Ventura County where we then lived. He taught us so many things about how to identify birds by their demeanor. That is, how one species behaved that was different from other birds. Some call it Gestalt. It is a characteristic that we sometimes don’t even realize we were using. Soon, we were birding with new techniques. One day, Richard suggested we go to Colombia to see tropical birds and new families. We signed up with a Victor Emanuel Nature Tour to Colombia led by Steve Hilty. That trip took us to another fairyland of birds. That was the beginning of international birding and discovering birds in 47 more countries. I learned Spanish at the community college so we could get around most of South and Central America. We learned Brazilian Portuguese, and bits of Thai and Indonesian. Steve spoke Spanish and some French. At the beginning, there were not many field guides so we had to study identification by “Build a Bird.” That meant, we got a written description of a bird and had to mentally get a picture in our heads of what it looked like. Later, I made my own field guides by taking a drawing of a similar bird and changing it by its description into the bird we could possibly see. Learning habitats came later.

Then, Steve and I went on a tour to Kenya and fell head over heels with the place. After we got home from that birding and animal adventure, we started making plans to move to Kenya. We lived in Nairobi for two years and visited places close by such as Tanzania, Rwanda, Egypt, Greece, United Kingdom, Seychelles, Philippines, India, and Thailand. Again, Kenya had a sketchy field guide which meant we spent hours after every safari studying skins at the Nairobi Natural History Museum. On our way back to California by way of Thailand, we bought a Circle the Pacific airline ticket and stopped for long periods of time in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Hawaii.
Steve and I went back to work for a short time. I worked in a STAT Lab and he in a pharmacy. After retiring we took to county birding, covering all 58 California counties many times. Steve and I discovered Western Field Ornithologists and became members. I joined the Board of Directors and soon became the Registrar for all conferences. In that way, I have made connections with some very special people. So glad we joined.

Apparently, we didn’t have near enough to do and contemplated organizing a Breeding Bird Atlas of Nevada County, the first ever Sierran county to tackle this project. We wondered if it was possible given the very high elevations and the difficulty of accessing remote areas. Turns out, it was possible. And thus began another adventure with birds but this time getting deeper into the knowledge about how birds give us clues when breeding. We learned to recognize nests and location preferences. Some nests were high in trees, others low in grass, some in holes on hillsides and others in aeries. Some birds build several “dummy” nests and the females pick the one she preferred. Some birds have no nest while others have elaborately woven ones. It was all so interesting.

Birds have been a driving force in my life and certainly a center of joy. Photographing and recording them has been and will continue to be a source of fun and exploration.

Chestnut-backed Chickadee. Photo by Mark Chappell.
The NACC and Taxonomy: Part Two

By Kimball L. Garrett and Jon L. Dunn

[Note: Kimball Garrett counts himself among the legions of ornithologists, birders, wildlife managers, and others who are constituents of the AOU Check-list Committee; WFO President Jon L. Dunn has been a member of the Committee since 2000.]

We begin this second installment (for Part One, see Sept. 2020 WFO newsletter) about the workings of the American Ornithological Society’s North American Classification Committee (NACC) by exploring a topic we touched on only peripherally in the last newsletter. Birders and ornithologists are especially fixated on species-level taxonomy, and the biological basis for what constitutes a “species” is largely agreed upon (even if some taxonomists prefer other means of delineating species). But taxonomies also deal with many higher levels, including genus, family, and order. In contrast to the species level category, these higher order categories have no set definition, but rather are determined by how taxa cluster in a phylogeny (evolutionary history).

Classification at the level of genus (plural = “genera”) is of particular importance because it determines the binomen of every species, that is, its two-part scientific name. Thus, generic assignments are among the most consequential, yet imprecise, decisions that the NACC must make. Unfortunately, there is no widespread agreement on the definition of a genus or, at least, how definitions are applied in the real world.

The Ornithologist’s Dictionary (Erritzoe et al. 2007) defines a genus as “A group of similar species considered more closely related mutually than any of them is with other species; in classification a unit ranking between species and family.” Few would argue with this definition, although it gives no guidance on where to draw the line between a genus and another taxonomic rank. Ernst Mayr (in, Principles of Systematic Zoology, published in 1969) wrote “A genus is a taxonomic category containing a single species, or a monophyletic group of species, which is separated from other taxa of the same rank [other genera] by a decided gap.” Okay, so now we have guidance as to where to draw the line: “a decided gap.”

A plethora of molecular phylogenies covering virtually all bird taxa gives us a more quantitative basis upon which to make decisions as to what constitutes a genus. One might use a certain genetic “distance” (such as the percent base pair difference in comparison of DNA segments), or the presumably correlated time elapsed since the taxa in question diverged from a common ancestor. But even here, there is no simple hard number or distance universally felt to correspond to genus-level differentiation. Jon Fjeldså pointed out in a recent Zoom lecture sponsored by the Linnaean Society and the British Ornithologist’s Club [available here: https://youtu.be/4EcV6-JGjyw ] that most passerine genera are about 10 million years old, but can range from 4 to 22 million years, and he noted that American taxonomists in general tend to recognize younger genera than do Europeans.

Recent NACC Check-list supplements have featured some major reorganizations of genera, and it is instructive to look at the proposals resulting in these changes and the comments of the committee members. You can find the proposals and comments here: https://americanornithology.org/nacc/current-prior-proposals/. Examples include the expansion of the shorebird genus Calidris to incorporate five previously monotypic (single species) genera [Proposal 2013-A-7], the splitting of the gull genus Larus into several genera [Proposal 2007-E-1a, -1b, -1c and -1d], and a shake-up in the genera of New World warblers [Proposal 2010-B-10]. And recall that the large duck genus Anas has been split up to include several genera, including the wigeon and their relatives (Mareca), the “blue-winged” ducks (Spatula), and the monotypic genus Sibirionetta for the Baikal Teal; Anas is now restricted to the Mallard complex, the pintails, and the Green-winged Teal. Worldwide, other very large and inclusive genera have been split up in recent years, for example Tangara tanagers, Nectarinia sunbirds, and Garrulax laughing-thrashes.

These generic splits and lumps arise from better phylogenetic data, but also from an effort to eliminate polyphyletic and paraphyletic taxa. A genus is “polyphyletic” if it includes one or more species that did not diverge from the common ancestor of the remaining species; in other words, “not everybody in the group belongs in the group.” A “paraphyletic” genus includes species with a single common ancestor but omits one or more species also descended from that most recent common ancestor (“not everybody who should be in the group is in the group”). In the case of the expanded circumscription of Calidris, it turned out that those five monotypic genera that were lumped into Calidris were phylogenetically nested among the various other species already in Calidris. An alternative would have been to keep those monotypic genera and (to avoid paraphyly) to split the remaining Calidris into several genera. The expanded Calidris appealed to the NACC because it reduced the number of monotypic genera and other species-poor genera. The genus category is not very informative if, rather than grouping together the most closely related species, it consists of large numbers of single-species “groups.”
An aversion to monotypic genera emerges frequently in NACC comments. This is well illustrated in the proposal [2016-B-2] to resurrect the genus Steganopus for the Wilson’s Phalarope (currently Phalaropus tricolor). At various times all three phalaropes have been placed in monotypic genera (e.g. from 3rd through 5th editions of the Check-list); beginning with the Sixth Edition in 1983 all have been merged into Phalaropus (which has nomenclatural priority). Birders know how distinctive the Wilson’s Phalarope is relative to the Red and Red-necked Phalaropes. Its deep honking calls are utterly unlike those of the other species, its foraging behavior and walking gait are different, and it has very different breeding and wintering habitats (not being marine at any season). Phylogenetic studies show that Red and Red-necked Phalaropes are more closely related to each other than either is to Wilson’s. Nevertheless, the NACC failed to adopt the proposal to recognize Steganopus by a vote of 4-6, largely because of the reluctance to recognize monotypic genera. One NACC member felt that Steganopus was a good “sub-genus,” which perhaps can be defined as a species or group of related species separated from others by a “gap that is somewhat less than decided.” Kevin Winker, who floated the Steganopus proposal, succinctly summarized the committee’s wrestling with genus-level decisions in the following wording in his proposal: “Although genera have historically been based on shared, derived morphological traits considered to be roughly genus-level in nature, the advent of genetic data has provided strong evidence of historical relationships largely independent of the effects of selection on phenotype. Integrating the two at the genus level, which has less definition than, for example, species limits, is difficult. In my view, we have yet to achieve either a convincing integration of the two types of data or an even-handed treatment of genus level groupings across large groups of birds. Given the scope of the problem, we may not solve these issues soon.”

As another example, the generic placement of the Five-striped Sparrow has long been controversial. It is currently known as Amphispiza quinquestriata, but is it a “good” Amphispiza? It was long placed in the large sparrow genus Aimophila, but that genus turned out to include three groups of species not particularly closely related to each other. In 2009 [Proposal 2009-A-12b], the NACC leaned toward transferring Five-striped Sparrow from Aimophila to Amphispiza, but was uncertain whether it might better deserve its own genus. An addendum proposal [2009-E-3], gave the NACC a choice between placing Five-striped in its own genus Amphispizopsis rather than Amphispiza, but there were only three votes to do so (the other 7 votes were to place it in Amphispiza). So Amphispiza at that point comprised three species: bilineata (Black-throated Sparrow; this is the nominate species in the genus – i.e., the species on which the generic name is based), belli (“Sage Sparrow”), and quinquestriata (Five-striped Sparrow). Subsequently, in the 53rd Supplement in 2012, belli was removed to the newly erected genus Artemisiospiza since it is only distantly related to Black-throated; it was split into Bell’s and Sagebrush Sparrows in the 54th Supplement in 2013. While genetic data indicate that Five-striped and Black-throated Sparrows are sister-species (each other’s closest living relatives), their divergence time approached that expected of the genus level, and they are quite different in vocalizations, structure, and behavior. Is Five-striped separated from Black-throated by a “decided gap?” Obviously, this is a judgment call. The NACC is likely to see a new proposal to erect Amphispizopsis for Five-striped Sparrow.
Some Ongoing Species-level Taxonomic Issues

Returning now to species-level issues faced by the AOS-NACC in the past and quite possibly in the future, here are just a few examples of complex taxonomic issues that may still need resolution.

Bean Goose

The AOS currently recognizes both Taiga Bean-Goose (Anser fabalis) and Tundra Bean-Goose (A. serrirostiris). Others (e.g. Dickinson and Remsen 2013, and Reeber 2015) treat these two as a single species, the Bean Goose (A. fabilis). Both taxa are documented with specimens from Alaska (Gibson and Withrow 2015), the Taiga represented by the eastern subspecies, the largest and most distinctive taxon, middendorffii. The Tundra is supported by specimens of serrirostiris, sometimes known as the “Thick-billed Bean-Goose.” There are a number of records of Bean Geese from Canada and the Lower 48. Many have been tentatively assigned to “species.” California has several records, two of which were accepted as the Tundra Bean-Goose. Another controversial bird from Imperial County was accepted only to Taiga/Tundra Bean-Goose. It had a bill shape, and head coloration, more like Taiga, but in overall size was more like Tundra. It wasn’t that much larger than the accompanying Greater White-fronted Geese (A. albifrons sponsa). One Japanese authority, Masayuki Kurechi, who examined the record, opined that it was far too small for middendorffii, which winters in eastern Honshu, even too small for an unnamed wintering population in western Honshu. He speculated that it was from an undescribed and unknown smaller population breeding farther west in Russia. A few years ago the NACC considered a motion to merge the bean geese back into a single species. While it received some support, it did not pass. A recent paper by Ottenburghs et al. (2020) recommended a one-species treatment. They indicated that secondary contact was established about 60,000 years ago and there had been high levels of recent introgression between the two species. They opined that based “on low genetic differentiation, considerable morphological variation and incomplete reproductive isolation, we argue that the Taiga and the Tundra Bean Goose should be treated as subspecies.” Their studies dealt with populations primarily from Europe. Additional studies, particularly of largest middendorffii, would be useful. The NACC is likely soon to revisit the issue based on Ottenburghs et al. (2020), but observers in the meantime should not be hesitant to assign stray individuals to simply Bean Geese.

Genetic studies show that the Pink-footed Goose (A. brachyrhynchus) is also closely related to the Bean Goose complex.

Greater White-fronted Goose (Anser albifrons)

Authorities differ on how many subspecies to recognize, but Dickinson and Remsen (2013) recognize five. Much of the variation is clinal and is based on size. Two subspecies are morphologically and genetically distinct. One is flavirostris, which breeds in Greenland, and the other is elgasi, the “Tule Goose,” breeding in southern Alaska, mostly between Cook Inlet and the Alaska Range, and wintering mostly in the western Sacramento Valley (Colusa NWR north to Sacramento NWR have the largest populations). Greenland flavirostris winters mostly in Ireland, but a few winter very rarely in the Atlantic region of eastern North America (North American gambelli is more numerous, Reeber 2015). Western elgasi, the
“Tule Goose,” is quite large, and many appear thick-necked. It has a rather long and attenuated bill. The black markings below are sparser. Their calls appear to be lower pitched. The late William Grenfell, who worked in the Sacramento Valley refuges said once that the examination of hunter-taken *elgasi* indicated their gizzards were much larger than those of the far more abundant *sponsa* subspecies. The diet and feeding behavior of *elgasi* differs. “Tule Geese” feed on, well, tules, and are less prone to feed out in the rice fields than *sponsa*.

**Mexican Duck (Anas diazi)**

The AOS (2020) recently restored the Mexican Duck to species status. It was lumped with the Mallard by the AOU in 1982 as a result of a study by Hubbard (1977). True to its name, most of the population is found in Mexico, mostly on the interior plateau of central Mexico, but some extend north to Arizona, New Mexico, and western Texas. Mexican Duck forms a closely related clade of *Anas* species, including American Black Duck (*A. rubripes*), Mottled Duck (*A. fulvigula*) and the Hawaiian Duck, or Koloa (*A. wyvilliana*). The two species of spot-billed ducks (*A. zonorhyncha* and *A. poecilorhyncha*) are also closely related. Hubbard (1977) indicated that hybridization between Mexican Ducks and Mallards was frequent, but the sample size was small. Mallards are now infrequent within the range of Mexican Duck, particularly during the breeding season. Moreover, genetic evidence shows that Mexican Duck is more closely related to American Black Duck and particularly Mottled Duck, not Mallard. Thus, logically, one is faced with lumping American Black, Mottled, and Hawaiian ducks with Mallard, or re-splitting Mexican Duck. There have been a handful, or more, of Mexican Duck reports from southeastern California, plus one from San Luis Obispo on the coast. David Van der Pluym and Lauren Harter, with extensive experience with Mexican Ducks and hybrids on the lower Colorado River, will evaluate these records in advance of CBRC circulation. The species has not yet been placed on the state list.

Hybridization between Mexican and Mottled Ducks in south Texas upriver along the Rio Grande in Hidalgo and Starr counties, where both taxa occur, has not been carefully investigated.

**Common Merganser (Mergus merganser)**

The North American subspecies is *americanus*. The two Old World subspecies (nominate *merganser* and similar *orientalis*) are known by the English name of Goosander. They differ in their upper wing pattern (alternate adult males) and bill shape (the bill of Old World birds is thinner in the mid-section with a more hooked tip). A few years ago on a winter trip to Japan, in February JLD, Brian Daniels, Larry Sansone, and Leo Ohtsuki studied Goosanders. There was a small group that included adult males and female plumaged birds, and some were engaged in courtship activities. JLD was struck by the head shape of the adult males with the forehead actually slanting forward and then a
steep rise to the crown, an entirely different shape from our Common Merganser. We photographed these males and Jonathan Alderfer based his illustration in the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America (7th ed.) on the photos. Since then JLD has carefully studied *americanus*, particularly during the courtship season, and have never seen this head shape. This difference alone suggests a species level difference. Eurasian *merganser* is rare in the western Aleutians and has been recorded to the central Aleutians (Gibson and Byrd 2007). It has also been recorded on Bering Sea islands. North American *americanus* is also known from the Bering Sea islands and has been recorded west to the Central Aleutians (ibid). Otherwise *merganser* is unknown in North America. The one record of Common Merganser from Greenland was *americanus* (Boertmann 1994).

**Long-eared Owl (Asio otus)**

This Holarctic species shows distinct morphological differences between New and Old World birds. North American birds have a more rufous facial disc that is more distinctly surrounded in black, has much stronger horizontal barring below, and has yellow, not reddish eyes. Genetically, the differences are over 1%. Magnus Robb & the Sound Approach (2015) indicate that they genetically differ by 1.13% and the calls are higher pitched in New World birds, but caution that the more infrequently calling females have higher pitched calls. There are two photographic records of Long-eared Owl from western Alaska that are detailed by Gibson et al. (2018), one at Buldir Island from 8-11 June 2016 (color photo in Western Birds 49:182, 2019), the other landed on a ship at sea southwest of St. Lawrence Island on 19 May 2006 (black-and-white photo published in Western Birds 39:198). Both birds are almost certainly nominate *asio*. While the two groups are allopatric, distinct morphological differences, along with differences in vocalizations, suggest a two species treatment.

**The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker complex**

These three species in the genus *Sphyrapicus* are composed of the monotypic Yellow-bellied (*S. varius*) and Red-naped (*S. nuchalis*) Sapsuckers, and the polytypic Red-breasted Sapsucker (*S. ruber*) with two subspecies, nominate *ruber* and more southern *daggetti*. They have had a varied treatment through the decades. Through the 3rd edition of the AOU Check-list (1910) Yellow-bellied (including Red-naped) and Red-breasted were treated as separate species. In the 4th edition (1931) Red-breasted and Yellow-bellied were lumped and this continued through the 5th edition (1957). Red-breasted and Yellow-bellied (including Red-naped) were split again and by the 6th edition and by the 7th edition (1998) Red-naped was split as a full species too. While very similar in plumage Red-naped and Yellow-bellied have different timing of plumage maturation in young birds. The definitive reference on identification in this complex is Devillers (1970). From our personal experience, hybridization (including back crossing) is very frequent between Red-naped and Red-breasted, at least as noted through field observations east of the Sierra and in the Mojave Desert, and it would seem that continued recognition as full species is questionable. Arguments in favor of this split were made by Johnson and Zink (1983), Johnson and Johnson (1986), and Cicero and Johnson (1996).

**Crossbills (genus Loxia)**

There has been much discussion in recent years of the 10+ Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) found in North America, which have different call note types, have different “home” ranges and conifer preferences. The differences in bill shape have evolved to facilitate extracting the seeds from the different types of cones of different conifers. These types are believed perhaps to be incipient species without strong genetic differentiation (Parkman et al. 2006). Whether or not one assigns species status to these types is a matter of personal taste, but assigning subspecies names to currently recognized call note types will be fraught with complexities. The Cassia Crossbill (*L. sinesciurus*) has recently been recognized as a separate species. It is restricted to the South Hills and Albion Mountains of southern Idaho (Twin Falls and Cassia County). The specific epithet of the scientific name, *sinesciurus*, literally means “without squirrels” and indeed those ranges lack Red Squirrels. As a result, the lodgepole pine cones there have evolved differently as have the Cassia Crossbill bills.

It is worth mentioning that such complexity, including call note differences, likely exists in the Old World too, where there are ten recognized subspecies, with isolated populations occurring in the Balearic Islands, North Africa, Himalaya, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Parrot Crossbill (*L. pytyopsittacus*) and more recently Scottish Crossbill (*L. scotica*) are considered separate species from the Common (=Red) Crossbill.

Sorting out the taxonomy within the Red Crossbill would seem to be a herculean task. Tackling the issues within White-winged Crossbill (*L. leucoptera*) should be a much easier task.
White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*)

The White-winged Crossbill (*L. leucoptera*) is currently composed of two subspecies, nominate *leucoptera* from North America and *bifasciata* in the Old World from Fennoscandia and across Russia to the Sea of Okhotsk. Previously, *megapalaga*, a resident in the highlands of Hispaniola, was treated as a subspecies of White-winged. It was elevated to full species rank (Hispaniola Crossbill) in 2003 (Banks et al. 2003). It has a thicker bill than nominate *leucoptera*, no doubt adapted to open the large hard cones of *Pinus occidentalis*, the only conifer on Hispaniola. Genetically, it is the sister species of the White-winged Crossbill (J. Groth unpub. data, in Parchman et al. 2006).

By current taxonomy the two subspecies of White-winged Crossbill are North American *leucoptera* and Palearctic *bifasciata*. The latter has a thicker (though slighter than Hispaniola Crossbill) bill, especially in the mid-section, and the white bar on the greater secondary coverts is thicker. Adult males are overall more intensely pink with fewer blackish marks. A stunning color photo of *bifasciata* adorns a recent cover of British Birds (October 2020). Both taxa show irruptive movements that can take birds well away from their home ranges. For instance, Holt et al. (2020) detail an invasion of *bifasciata* in the UK with 219 recorded. Periodic invasions of *leucoptera* have been well chronicled. Several decades ago JLD happened to listen to recordings of *bifasciata* made in an invasion year from the Netherlands, presumably of contact notes. Knowing the vocalizations of *leucoptera* well, he felt these call notes were totally different but he had no field experience with *bifasciata*, which seems to be a less well known taxon. After all, North American *leucoptera* is the nominate subspecies and Linnaeus was Swedish. A footnote in Dickinson and Christidis (2014) directed JLD to a publication (Elmberg 1992) where distinct differences in songs between the two taxa are described. The author, a Swede, was comparing the birds he had heard singing in eastern Canada (New Brunswick) in August of 1991. The songs were “very different.” He describes both and indicated that *bifasciata* has a song more like Common (=Red) Crossbill.

If the morphology is different and the vocalizations strongly differ, it is reasonable to wonder why these two are not recognized as separate species. Although observers in both Eurasia and North America may know the species well, they don’t have a global knowledge of the species. Elmberg (1992) points out that a recording of a singing Two-barred Crossbill in, *All the bird songs of Europe*, was recorded in Canada, thus was nominate *leucoptera*. JLD has been told that at least one of the records from Iceland, where the species is casual, involves *leucoptera*. The five records (all specimens) from Greenland, including one from the southeast, are all of *leucoptera*. This subspecies is found west in Alaska to the limit of forest on the Seward Peninsula. Lehman (2019) details four records from St. Lawrence Island, one of which involves a specimen of *leucoptera*. The published photos (ibid) also look like *leucoptera*. There are two specimen records of nominate *leucoptera* from the Pribilof Islands (Mailard and Hanna 1921, Kenyon and Phillips 1965). In the Aleutians, Gibson and Byrd (2007) treat the species as hypothetical based on two sight records, one from Attu (30 July 1983) and the other from Adak (10 November 1986) from the western and central Aleutians, respectively. It is reasonable to opine that the Attu Island record in particular, if correctly identified, could well have been *bifasciata* given the proximal regular occurrence of that subspecies. Tomkovich (2008) indicated that *bifasciata* has been recorded north in the Russian Far East, as far as the Anadyr River Basin. After a large mid-November 2014 storm, a male Eurasian Siskin (*Spinus spinus*) reached Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island in the eastern Aleutians and wintered. At the same feeder at least one White-winged Crossbill was photographed, the first substantiated record for the Aleutians. It is uncertain which subspecies it pertained to. North American *leucoptera* shows a strong preference for spruce and fir trees, while *bifasciata* is closely tied to larch (*Larix*) forests. It would seem likely that the different bill shapes are adapted to feed on the cones of these tree species. If split, the English name of White-winged Crossbill is well-established for *leucoptera*, as is Two-barred Crossbill for *bifasciata*.

Juncos

The genus *Junco* includes one of the most variable North American species, the Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*). Particularly in the west, winter junco flocks can contain a bewildering array of plumages, reflecting both geographical and within-population variation. Anybody interested in juncos would do well to devour the classic specimen-based analysis by Alden Miller (1941); this work contains highly detailed plumage and morphometric analyses and a detailed treatment of distribution and geographical zones of intergradation.
In the Fifth Edition of the AOU Check-list (1957) the following full species of juncos were recognized: Slate-colored (J. hyemalis, with three subspecies including “Cassiar” J. h. cisimontanus), White-winged (J. aikeni), Oregon (J. oreganus, with eight subspecies including “Pink-sided” J. o. mearnsi), and Gray-headed (J. caniceps, including “Red-backed” J. c. dorsalis), along with Mexican (now Yellow-eyed) Junco (J. phaeonotus), Baird’s Junco (J. bairdi) of the Baja California Cape District, and Guadalupe Junco (J. insularis) of Guadalupe Island off Baja California. [The divergent Volcano Junco, J. vulcani, of Costa Rica and w. Panama was not treated since at that time the Check-list did not include Middle America.] In the “Big Lump” (32nd Supplement to the Check-list) in 1973 the juncos were merged into just three species: Yellow-eyed (as “Mexican Junco” was rechristened with Baird’s now included), Gray-headed (which was tentatively still given full species status as further studies were pending), and Dark-eyed (the name coined for all the remaining North American juncos including Guadalupe). By the Sixth Edition of the Check-list in 1983, Gray-headed too had been lumped into the Dark-eyed Junco.

More recently, molecular analyses (Mila et al. 2007, Friis et al. 2016) show a clear pattern of rapid expansion of juncos northward from Middle America and the rapid diversification and plumage differentiation of yellow-eyed and dark-eyed populations from west of the Mexican isthmus northward through the rest of North America. These studies show that the yellow-eyed population alticola of Guatemala and e. Chiapas is an old lineage which is genetically distant from all of the more northerly forms; they also yield the surprising result that not only was bairdi of the Baja Cape District an old divergent lineage, but so too was insularis of Guadalupe Island. Subsequently, both Guadalupe Junco (55th Supplement in 2014) and Baird’s Junco (58th Supplement in 2017) were restored by the NACC to full species status. In Proposals 2017-A-11a, b, and c, the NACC agreed to the aforementioned split of the Baird’s Junco but declined to split the Guatemalan taxon alticola and also rejected a motion to essentially “punt” by lumping Yellow-eyed and Dark-eyed Juncos into a single species (no English name was proposed for that potential split, though we’re sort of partial to “Variable-eyed Junco”).

The remarkable divergence of the Yellow-eyed Juncos of most of Mexico (and portions of Arizona and New Mexico) and all of the subspecies currently subsumed under the Dark-eyed Junco has occurred only over the last 50,000 years or so. The Red-backed Junco (dorsalis) was the first dark-eyed form to diverge from Yellow-eyed, and other northern groups split off subsequently (most recently the western “Oregon” group and widespread boreal “Slate-colored” group). Many observers have noted that dorsalis is in many ways (e.g. plumage, song, geographical range) a “dark-eyed” Yellow-eyed Junco, and the phylogenetic studies show that it represents an evolutionary transition from Middle American yellow-eyed juncos to the widespread North American dark-eyed populations. If the “Dark-eyed Junco” is once again carved into several full species, a course of action hinted at by Friis et al. (2016), placement of the Red-backed Junco will likely be a sticking point.

We thank Daniel D. Gibson for his helpful comments on a draft of this article.

**Literature Cited**


Beyond the Field Guides: Beginning to Build an Ornithological Library
By Kenneth P. Able and Ryan S. Terrill

The fundamental books for any bird watcher are field guides (lots of them!) and regional works on the status and distribution of species. As interests and abilities grow, many find that they would like to know much more about the lives of the birds that they enjoy. Getting started in building a library can seem daunting because of the vast number of books available, many of them very good. Our goal here is to provide a few suggestions to begin this journey. Beware, it can easily get out of hand and become an odyssey!

For a broad, general introduction to bird biology, an undergraduate ornithology text is probably the best place to start. *Ornithology, 2019. By Frank B. Gill and Richard O. Prum.* 4th edition, W.H. Freeman, NY, 688 pgs., is an excellent and up-to-date text. This edition is the first to use full color in both art and design, and includes over 400 color photographs.

Most will find several other references very useful. The American Ornithological Society (AOS, formerly the American Ornithologists’ Union) has for many decades been the official arbiter of classification and nomenclature of North and Middle American birds. Its committees determine the scientific, English and Spanish names of species, the genera to which they belong, and the sequence of taxa on the list that is designed to reflect evolutionary relationships among species and higher taxonomic groups (genera, families, orders, etc.). Seven editions of the *A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds* were published in book form, the last in 1998. Since that time, the Checklist has moved on-line with open access: Check-list of North American Birds. 2020. Chesser, R. T., S. M. Billerman, K. J. Burns, C. Cicero, J. L. Dunn, A. W. Kratter, I. J. Lovette, N. A. Mason, P. C. Rasmussen, J. V. Remsen, Jr., D. F. Stotz, and K. Winker. http://checklist.americanornithology.org/taxa). Supplements to the list are published annually (in July), providing up-to-date information on additions to the list, lumps and splits of species, name changes, etc., and are also available on-line.

Two remarkable volumes by our own Peter Pyle are *Identification Guide to North American Birds* (Part I. Columbidae to Ploceidae. 1997, 732 pgs.; Part II. Anatidae to Alcidae, 2008, 836 pgs. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA. Written primarily for bird banders, these books provide a wealth of information on identifying the species, subspecies, age and sex of any North American bird. Banders, of course, work with birds in the hand, but these books provide information that is useful for all who observe birds under typical field conditions and especially with well-photographed birds. The timing and pattern of molt has become an increasingly important tool for identifying birds and features prominently in Pyle’s volumes, which also contain detailed introduction to molt concepts and terminology.


Birds have so many unique characteristics not shared with their vertebrate relatives that it is not surprising that there are book-length treatments of many of these features. We will mention just a few. Bird song has fascinated people from our very beginnings. *The Singing Life of Birds, 2005. By Donald E. Kroodsma.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, NY, 482 pgs., is a very engaging treatment of all aspects of bird song, from its
physiological basis to ecology and function, and even its aesthetics. Kroodsma is a scientist who has spent his entire career studying bird song.

Among migratory animals, birds are the unrivalled champions. The subject is so large and complex that there have been few synthetic treatments of the whole topic. The Migration Ecology of Birds. By Ian Newton. 2008. Academic Press, NY, 984 pgs., does indeed cover the ecological aspects of migration, but is much broader. Newton, a British ornithologist, includes physiological aspects of migration, orientation and navigation mechanisms, the evolution of migration, and much more.

Studies of the origin and evolution of birds have exploded over the last two decades. Amazing new discoveries are often announced several times a year. As is typical of rapidly developing fields, controversy and conflict often roil. It’s not surprising in a discipline where sweeping conclusions are often based on a fragment of an ancient fossil that heated arguments will ensue. And they have! In, The Rise of Birds: 225 Million Years of Evolution. 2015. By Sankar Chatterjee. 2nd edition, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 392 pgs., Chatterjee provides as objective a treatment of current theory as you’ll find anywhere.

Birds that have become extinct more recently, since about 1600, have been treated species by species in the beautifully illustrated Extinct Birds. 2001. By Errol Fuller. Comstock Publ. Assoc., Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY, 398 pgs. Though the subject matter of the book is undeniably tragic, the very detailed historical accounts make fascinating reading. Some near-extinct species and a few believed lost but since rediscovered are also covered. Because human-caused extinctions have been both rampant and biased toward certain kinds of birds (e.g., island birds and flightless birds), understanding what bird diversity was like before the current mass extinction gives the reader a context for the global diversity of birds.

Without a grasp of evolution and its mechanisms, it’s impossible to understand avian (or any other kind of) biology. Again, we recommend a new and excellent undergraduate text as a good place to start: Evolution: Making Sense of Life. 2020. By Douglas J. Emlen and Carl Zimmer. 3rd ed., W.H. Freeman Press, NY, 816 pgs. Many of the fundamental studies of evolutionary concepts have involved birds, not least the seminal observations by Darwin on the mockingbirds and finches of the Galapagos Islands. More recent studies of those finches have provided perhaps the best and most elegant demonstration of the action of natural selection on any natural wild animal population. Outstanding, long-term studies are described in detail in a superb book by researchers, Peter and Rosemary Grant. 40 Years of Evolution: Darwin’s Finches on Daphne Major Island. 2014. Princeton Univ. Press, 432 pgs. Birds have also played a large role in the development of species concepts and models of how new species evolve, especially through the important syntheses of Ernst Mayr in the mid- and late 20th Century. Birders are rightly obsessed with species limits, and understanding how speciation works can help us understand how species limits are determined and taxonomic decisions made. Speciation in Birds. 2007. By Trevor Price. W.H. Freeman Press, 480 pgs., (the author also studied Darwin’s finches) ties together the roles of genetic processes, biogeography, behavior and ecology, and the causes of reproductive isolation in the emergence of new bird species.

Many important advances in the study of animal behavior have also been based on birds. An introduction that will place the behavior of birds within the broader context of other animals, both vertebrate and invertebrate, is Dustin R. Rubenstein and John Alcock’s Animal Behavior: An Evolutionary Approach. 2018. 11th ed., Oxford Univ. Press, NY, 672 pgs.


Two other ornithologists would surely come up with a quite different list to make up an avian library: the universe of possibilities is very large. But one book often leads to another and all of these have extensive bibliographies. We hope that some of the books we’ve reviewed here will provide you a portal into the amazing biology of birds.
Riding Out the Pandemic in the Junipers: A Postscript
By Kimball L. Garrett

In the last WFO newsletter I mused a bit about life in Juniper Hills on the north slope of the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County as the COVID pandemic altered strategies for work, birding, and life. I mentioned looking forward to seeing fall and winter unfold in the area, and those changes have certainly arrived, as juncos and White-crowned Sparrows flock to the feeders and the occasional Pine Siskin and Purple Finch (and even a Cassin’s Finch) call in flight overhead.

But an unexpected change happened on 18 September, when a northern tongue of the Bobcat Fire swept through Juniper Hills. This fire had been burning in the core of the San Gabriel Mtns. for nearly two weeks, with the southern flank threatening homes in the southern foothills. But weather changes and the fuel of forests that hadn’t burned in decades steered the fire northward and downhill in mid-September and on that Friday afternoon, with the cars already packed and the sheep having been trailered out a couple of days earlier, it was time to get out. Fellow birders Jim Moore and Debbie Drews generously put us up at their house in Agua Dulce (many thanks!!), and we were able to return to our neighborhood on Saturday morning to find house and property unscathed (many thanks to the fire crews!!). But starting just 300 meters south of our house, the Joshua tree and juniper woodlands up the slope were completely burned – hundreds of acres of blackened desert slope woodlands all the way to the top of the first ridge and beyond. Sadly, the Joshua trees and junipers appear to have been killed outright by the fire, and their demise will likely start a transition to a lower stature association of desert chaparral and invasive annuals. Sadder still was the loss of dozens of houses in the upper neighborhoods of Juniper Hills and Cima Mesa.

The Bobcat Fire impacted other nearby bird habitats. Much of the tall riparian growth along Big Rock Creek burned as did significant tracts of singleleaf pinyon woodlands south of the Big Pines Highway. Some cherished mountain and foothill forest birding sites in the San Gabriels (Buckhorn Flat, Big Santa Anita Canyon, West Fork of the San Gabriel River, to name just a few) were heavily impacted by the fire.

Thankfully, tracts of intact Joshua trees and junipers are still within walking distance of the house, so comparisons of the burned and unburned areas over the coming years should be interesting. Just this morning (5 November) I walked up into the burn and was surprised and heartened to see a Gray Flycatcher foraging among the burned junipers. The first rains of the winter are predicted in just a couple of days, and I look forward to seeing that first sprig of green in the burned zone – and to following the response of the biota as the years go by.
Producing the Nevada County Breeding Bird Atlas
By Diane Rose

Six years before Covid-19, my husband, Steve, and I took on a project that nearly killed us both. It was more difficult than either of us could have ever imagined, but surprisingly fun and addictive too. I’m not being overly dramatic. It was definitely a mission of contrasts. The project was to gather breeding data for Nevada County, California birds and to produce a book. The concept was ambitious for several reasons. No one had undertaken a breeding bird atlas before for a county in the Sierra Nevada and there were almost no previous breeding data for this area. Even Grinnell and Miller had mostly skipped it. The terrain was rough and atlas blocks were extremely difficult to access even by foot.

In 2014, after a lot of consideration and hand wringing, Steve and I decided to give up county and international birding in order to find out as much as we could about the county where we lived. Naively, we jumped into the project with both feet.

Nevada County has 110, 5 km by 5 km blocks. The block numbering system was cumbersome and dull so over a glass of wine and a candlelight dinner, we named the blocks—Antipodes, Buzzard Roost, Mystic, Jackson Meadow, Sagehen, Spenceville, Big Spring, Pilot Peak, Baltimore Lake, Wolf Mountain, and Defies-a-Name were in the mix. These names elicited a certain romantic and fanciful aspect to our data gathering. Then, we pored over maps to see possible roads or trails leading into and throughout each block. We needed access by whatever means possible: highway, county road, paved country lane, timber company forest road, narrow trail surrounded by granite walls, or wide but extremely rocky jeep tracks. We had to get in. At one point after days of traveling by horrific rocky roads, I asked Steve if he thought it was possible for us to get concussions the way our poor brains were slamming around inside our skulls.

The first year, beginning in mid-March and ending in early August revealed that we would have to gather data seven days a week without a break even in terrible weather. In fact, we should start earlier and end later. Elevations ranged from 500 to 9,000 ft. Even so, one year in and we were committed. With help, we could do it. Sierra Foothills Audubon Society listened to our plea and sponsored us. And so began the arduous adventure.

The second year, we got birder friends to take on some of the blocks. We trained each person individually on how to enter breeding data on a field card we designed. Some birders took the block where they lived and one or two additional blocks. It was important to harvest dates with the confirmations. It mattered when nest building, egg laying, nestling feeding, and fledging began and ended for each species. The goal was to document breeding confirmation for at least 30 species in each block. Many blocks were thought to have fewer than 70 breeding species. It would be a challenge.

At the end of the season, atlassers sent in their reports. Sometimes, we received no report—the atlaser had abandoned their block and a whole season of data collection was lost. The year was gone. Steve and I were covering 50 blocks. No data for a whole year in a block was a difficult pill to swallow. Block abandonment, however, is common in BBAs. We committed to 80 blocks the next year. Was that even possible? One thing for sure, we were persistent.
During the fourth and fifth years, several very dear birder friends helped in amazing ways. Steve made a plea to Nevada state birders and got responses and help. Bay Area birders, who had to cross the width of the state, helped us significantly. They came and didn’t complain about the difficult areas we had left to cover. Friends who had hiked the Pacific Crest Trail surveyed granitic blocks and trails impossible for us and gathered more data. And then, in mid-September of the last year, we had all the data we were going to get. We had collected 3,901 unique confirmations, well beyond our goal of 3,600.

During those data-gathering five years, we were drenched by splashing water from careless drivers, engulfed in clouds of dust, rained and snowed on, eaten by hordes of mosquitoes, buzzed by gnats, suffered from the heat or cold, threatened with gun violence, made lasting friendships, enjoyed incredible panoramic views, fell several times and broke a foot and several ribs, accosted by marijuana growers, cornered by a pair of snarling dogs, invited to private property with Turkey Vultures nesting in a tree house, startled by bears, heard the sweet spring and summer songs of a multitude of species, found many nests with eggs or nestlings, chatted up by passers-by, and welcomed into homes and gardens to gather data. As I said, this was a project of contrasts.

For the book, Breeding Bird Atlas of Nevada County, California, Steve found a willing editor. He designed the page layout for the book. Happily, we got fabulous artists for the book cover, frontispiece, and species accounts. Starting with the first species account, Steve went into a near trance-like mode and put every bit of data we had on that particular species onto computer pages. After a few days, he began compiling it into understandable maps, tables, and descriptions. Then, it was on to the next species. He did that for 173 species. He wrote everything he knew about each species and I edited it. That is, reading forward and backward, over and over. Volunteers graciously and enthusiastically agreed to review species accounts. We got a proofreader. Even with the errors we all found, the proofreader found more. We edited. Found a publisher and bargained a price. The book was printed and delivered to our house so we could mail off copies. On the front cover, a Mountain Quail stands on a rocky outcrop, his bill open, about to blast a ringing ‘quark!’ across a Sierra vista. The book sold well until Covid-19 hit and then dropped to a trickle.

As an added note, while all this was going on, I was designing WFO Conference registration, stuffing packets and name badge holders while taking phone calls and helping folks with conference questions. Thankfully, WFO members are so delightful and easy to work with. Otherwise, I could never have done it.
With prospects for an effective Covid-19 vaccine looking promising, we are more-than-ready to get back to something like normal again. In that spirit, we invite you to attend WFO’s Annual Conference next August in Reno. This is the same venue we’d chosen for this year’s cancelled conference.

Look for more information and details early in 2021.

As always, the conference offers excellent and informative presentations, a variety of workshops, and field trips to many of the hotspots in west-central Nevada, Lake Tahoe, and the east-central Sierra Nevada of California. Enjoy spectacular scenery, great weather, and all the bird highlights of fall migration. As well as the chance to see old friends again and to make new ones.

Dr. Morgan Tingley, an Associate Professor at U.C. Los Angeles, will give the keynote talk Saturday evening and will discuss his research with the Institute for Bird Populations on the effects of fire on Sierra birds (a “hot” topic, if there ever was one!).

Join us for:
- Science Sessions Friday and Saturday afternoons
- Photo Identification and Bird Sound Challenge events
- Workshops covering a variety of bird identification and field skills
- Plenty of full-day field trips (Thursday and Sunday) and half-day trips (Friday and Saturday mornings).

The 2021 conference will be at the Whitney Peak Hotel, Reno’s only non-smoking/non-gaming conference venue!

Photos by Martin Meyers. Sagebrush Sparrow (Pyramid Lake, NV); Pinyon Jays (Carson River Park, NV); White-headed Woodpecker (Pope Beach, NV); Williamson’s Sapsucker (General Creek, CA)
Announcements

Membership Rates
In October, the board voted to approve an increase in membership rates. These new rates will be effective on January 1, 2021.

Regular: $50 one year, $90 two years, $125 three years
Family: $60 one year; $110 two years; $150 three years
Canada/Europe: $60 one year; $110 two years; $150 three years
Mexico: $25 one year; $50 two years; $75 three years

One time offer for a 5-year membership, available thru the end of 2020:
Regular $165
Family $200

Farewell and Thanks to Kurt Leuschner
By Jon Dunn
In early September, Kurt Leuschner’s two-year term as President of WFO came to an end. He’ll serve now as Past President until 2022. Kurt organized the Palm Desert conference in 2010 and the Board retreat there in 2019, as well as an earlier retreat in Zzyzx in 2015 in the Mojave Desert of California, not far from Las Vegas. Kurt has led a number of WFO expeditions, most recently last winter to Tasmania, just before Covid-19 closed down the world. As President, Kurt worked closely with the Board and took the initial lead in developing our Racial Justice statements. Since joining the Board, he’s always been very supportive of our Student Programs. Kurt also worked on the design and helped produce our individualized t-shirts for our annual conferences as well as facilitating the production of other merchandise. We will look forward to Kurt’s continued presence and advice in the years ahead and thank him for his service as president. As Vice President, Kurt and I worked closely together on a number of issues and this is very helpful now as I step into his shoes. This partnership continues with our new Vice President, John Harris.

As a gift to show our appreciation for Kurt’s two fine years of leadership, the Board presented him with an original painting of a Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard (Uma inornata) by artist John Schmitt. Kurt has long been fascinated by reptiles and he showed me three new Life lizards on the WFO October retreat a few years ago, including this fine endemic species to the Coachella Valley. I took photos at that time which helped John execute the illustration. John is a workhorse for the new illustrations in the NGS guide.

![Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard (Uma inornata). By John Schmitt.](image)
Nominations Committee Seeks Individuals to Serve on the Board of Directors. John Harris
The Nominations Committee is soliciting suggestions for nominations for two open positions on the Board of Directors. Nominees must be members of WFO and self-nominations are welcome. Each board member serves on one or more standing committees: Publications, Student Programs, Finance, Fundraising and Outreach, Conservation and Science Policy, Field Trips, Meetings, and Awards, as well as ad hoc committees. In addition to a planning, policy-making, and oversight role, Board members are also involved in organizing and conducting the annual conference. The term is for three years. The board meets 3-4 times a year by teleconference and in person at the annual conference. All board members attend the conference. We seek hard-working, engaged members. Being a Board member represents a significant commitment of time and energy, and prospective Board members should be dedicated to helping maintain and grow all our programs, including the publication of Western Birds.

Deadline for receiving nominations is April 30, 2021. Members interested in proposing a nominee to serve on the Board may contact John Harris, Chair of the Nominations Committee at johnh@mills.edu.

WFO Action on Racial Justice. Chris Swarth, Chair, Diversity and Inclusivity subcommittee
The Diversity and Inclusivity subcommittee was formed in June to examine ways that WFO can be more welcoming and inclusive to Black birders, and to all those in under-represented groups. The board recently approved a Racial Justice statement that is now posted on the WFO web site.

In order to increase the racial diversity of WFO, the board also approved a one-year, free membership for Blacks, Latinx, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or others in under-represented groups. For those wishing to take advantage of this free membership, we ask that they submit their contact information along with a brief statement explaining, ‘How does this membership further my interest in field ornithology?’ and ‘What do I hope to benefit from becoming a WFO member?’ Membership info can be sent to WFO President Jon Dunn. Please share this opportunity with anyone you know.

Thanks to Pam Young, Executive Director, Golden Gate Audubon Society, for recommending for WFO members an incredibly insightful Nov. 18 video by and about black birders in the Deep South. The panel features eight birders who discuss what it’s like to bird while being Black. The video includes Dr. J. Drew Lanham, an author featured in the Book Review section of the most recent issue of Western Birds, and NY Audubon board member Christian Cooper. Many of the issues the panel describes certainly exist in the West. The conclusion to this 90-minute video speaks directly to what WFO and other similar organizations are trying to accomplish. The video can be seen at, https://alaudubon.org/talks/

Central Valley Bird Club Announces Student Research Grant Program
The Central Valley Bird Club has recently established a student research grant program. Grants will support research that contributes to expanding the knowledge and conservation of birds and their habitats in the California's Central Valley. Up to 2 awards will be available per year for up to $1,500/grant. Grant funds may be used for a wide range of purposes, including equipment, travel, stipends, and publication costs. The club encourages applicants from diverse backgrounds and orientations.

Applicants must be enrolled in an academic program at the Bachelor's, Master's or Doctorate level and must complete a brief application describing their research project. Eligibility requirements and the application form will be posted soon on the Central Valley Bird Club web site. (www=cvbirds.org). The submission deadline is flexible. Applications will be considered within six weeks of date submitted.

Application materials and further information are currently available from Research Committee Chair Dan Airola (d.airola@sbcglobal.net).
Think Christmas, Think WFO Special Publications
Please visit the WFO web site, Publications tab, and consider purchasing one of our Special Publication monographs. These beautiful, informative books make wonderful Christmas gifts for family or friends.

Learn about Trans-Pacific Bird Migration
The Morro Coast Audubon Society recently aired a show on their MCAS YouTube Channel featuring Peter Pyle discussing trans-pacific migrations. Learn about the remarkable movement patterns of albatross, sharks, and other open ocean animals as ornithologist and marine biologist Peter Pyle presents his research on Trans-Pacific Migration. Find out how Pacific Ocean migrants overcome the hardships and risks of long-distance travel through and over the inhospitable and food-deprived central Pacific Ocean. The great flights of Black-footed Albatrosses, which come 4,000 miles to California to get food for their chicks, will be a primary focus. In addition, Peter discusses the fasting of turtles, tuna, Great White Sharks and other marine animals, as well as the surprising over-water journeys of various shorebirds, land birds, insects, and bats, and he will put all of this information into a conservation context. During the late 1970s and early 1980s Peter participate in the Hawaii, Micronesia, and Samoa Forest Bird Surveys. From the early 1980s through the early 2000s much of his research was conducted on birds and white sharks on the Farallon Islands. He has a special interest in bird molt and how it can be used to age birds, and has published many papers and taught many workshops on this subject. Among bird banders, he’s known for his Identification Guides on molt, ageing, and sexing information for North American birds. Peter works for the Institute for Bird Populations in Point Reyes Station, California, and in 2016 he received WFO’s Harry S. Swarth Award for major scientific contributions to western ornithology.

To view the video, go to: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-j4mKcOOk47aXSrqc3m2XZw
This summer I completed a research project on a population of Indian Peafowl (Pavo cristatus) in Pasadena. Peafowl have established many self-sustaining feral populations throughout the globe, including two prominent ones in Southern California. My observational study focused on a group of about 40-60 birds that lived in my neighborhood in east Pasadena throughout the summer (part of their Pasadena population).

I was surprised to observe many instances of cooperative behavior among the birds. Pheasants are not known for cooperativity. One notable example included frequent mobbing of predators. On a weekly and even daily basis, agitated peafowl, when threatened by a predator, human, or anything else, give a loud honk call repeatedly, and all the peafowl in the vicinity (except mothers with young chicks) gathered to collectively respond to the threat. These mobs were as large as 40 individuals, and once they formed the birds stayed together with their neck feathers raised, surrounding the threat until it dissipated, sometimes with many of the gathered birds giving honk calls themselves. I witnessed mobbing of dogs, racoons, and Buteo hawks, and my neighbors reported mobbing of predators as large as coyotes.

I also observed a case of cooperative brood rearing. Normally, peahens raise broods of 1-5 chicks on their own. In the case I observed, two females accompanied the same brood for at least two months. I first noticed the group in mid-May, though unfortunately I did not see them during the nest building or incubation process. In mid-July, one of the females had disappeared, perhaps taken by a predator. Before she disappeared, the two females were always close to one another, and while they rarely interacted directly with each other, both frequently interacted with all of the chicks. Both females, for example, pointed out food sources to the chicks, led them to roosting sites, and appeared to engage in bonding behavior with the chicks.

To my knowledge, cooperative breeding has not been reported in Indian Peafowl, and has been recorded in only three other species in the pheasant family. Interestingly, one of those three – the Kalij Pheasant – only began cooperatively breeding in its introduced range in Hawaii, where the behavior has become widespread and where population density is high and there is little opportunity for dispersal, apparently much like the species’ situation in Pasadena.

Sources Cited


Barn Owl illustration by Alex Cho. Alex is 15 years old and lives in the Bay Area. He’s been interested in birds from a young age and has fledged into an excellent birder, artist, and photographer! Alex made this drawing after he saw his first Barn Owl on a birding trip with Jon Dunn.
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Thanks to all those who submitted articles, essays, artwork, photographs, and announcements for this newsletter. The deadline for the March issue is March 5. Send stories, announcements, photographs, or other items to cswarth10@gmail.com.