

Checklists and English Names for Birds in Australia

RICHARD SCHODDE*

This paper is based on a presentation of this subject by Dr Schodde following the Annual General Meeting of the Association in Canberra on 17 January 1976. A number of members asked that it be reproduced in the Journal for the benefit of those unable to be present on that occasion, hence its inclusion here. The views expressed are those of the Author and are not necessarily representative of the views of the Association.—Hon. Editor.

A checklist has a variety of functions. For the professional ornithologist it serves essentially as a summary of taxonomic knowledge about birds up to the time of its publication. Each species is given the correct scientific name according to current understanding of its taxonomic limits. Within each species, component subspecies are delineated wherever evidence is sufficient to show that they exist. Other names that have been used for the species or its subspecies are enumerated in synonymies so that the forms to which these names apply in the early literature can be identified readily. Summaries of distribution are given, overtly to add to basic information about each form and often covertly to bolster decisions about the limits of subspecies. And the subspecies, species, genera and families are arranged in a sequence that reflects, as far as it can, the closeness of their relationships, again according to current knowledge.

For the amateur bird watcher, however, a checklist functions in a rather simpler way. All he basically needs from it is the accepted scientific and vernacular name for each species, and perhaps the account of its distribution. Synonymies and arrangements of species are of little significance to him but standard English names, eschewed by professionals and usually omitted from world checklists, are all important. And rightly so, because they give him his own means of communication with his peers.

To serve these purposes, both for professionals and amateurs, names have to be reliable and consistent. The repeated changing of names upsets the system. This in fact was the underlying

reason for the introduction of a scientific nomenclature for animals and plants in the eighteenth century. With various vernacular names being used for the same species in different countries then, the early biologists busy cataloguing the elements of nature needed an international name for each species they dealt with, simply to ensure that each would know what animal the other was talking about. So the *binomen*, employing the classical names of latin and greek, was introduced. The binomen comprises two parts, by definition: a second name to identify a given species and a first or generic name to denote the group to which the particular species is most closely related. Herein lay the seeds of a dilemma in which we have come to find ourselves in the twentieth century.

The eighteenth century saw the establishment of a binomial nomenclature, the nineteenth saw the introduction of evolutionary theory by Darwin and Wallace, and now the twentieth has seen their development and integration. Today we have a definition of a species that is biological rather than purely morphological. Instead of it comprising a group of similar-looking individuals in a museum drawer, the species is now generally thought of as a population in a particular region of similar-looking individuals that is reproductively compatible within itself but reproductively incompatible, or almost so, with its nearest related forms. Moreover, species, we now realize, can and do break up into geographically separate subspecies. Their very isolation provides the circumstances for their eventual evolution into morphologically and reproductively separate species. Whether they have reached this stage yet is often very difficult to prove, as in the cases of the Clinking and Grey Currawongs and the Eastern and Western Yellow Robins. Here the taxono-

* Checklist Compiler, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union.

mist, having evaluated all the evidence available to him, still often has to resort to an *educated* guess.

The decision is easier in the case of geographically and morphologically distinct forms that are linked by hybrid zones or stepped clines wherever they meet. Here the decision is made according to degree of reproductive compatibility. Thus the Black-backed and White-backed Magpies and various members of the Grey Shrike-thrush group are now lumped. Steps in clines, incidentally, often denote zones of hybridization and introgression between previously isolated populations.

In the higher taxonomic categories of genus and above, studies based on comparative anatomy, behaviour, and even molecular affinity have progressed gradually during the twentieth century. Though more remains to be clarified, particularly about the relatives of Australian land birds, much has been learnt of the characteristics of each species and what its nearest relatives are. This has led to increasingly better approximations about what species should be included in a given genus, about what genera should be included in a given family, and so on. It is, of course, easy for anyone to dismiss genera and families as groupings of convenience; they cannot, after all, have the biological definition of reproductive compatibility, and hence genetic affinity, that species can. Such an attitude, unfortunately, defuses interest in the true goals of taxonomic research; that of determining the relationships between all organisms in space and time. Only after the nearest relatives of each and every species of Australian bird are known can really long-standing decisions be made about the composition of genera and families.

With this broadening of the base of taxonomic research, taxonomists have been faced with the problem of either squeezing new levels of taxonomic groupings into the old binomial system of nomenclature, or of devising a completely new system, or of expanding the old binomial nomenclature to cope. In general, and certainly in all checklists of birds, the last alternative has been adopted. The most tangible evidence of expansion is to be found in the development of a trinomial nomenclature that, in addition to naming genera and species, names subspecies as well. Perhaps more importantly, the old binomial system has been expanded and used by taxono-

mists to express, as far as it can, the natural relations between species and subspecies. Accordingly, the most closely related species are now placed next to each other, and so on with genera and families. The binomen for species has thus become not only a handle for identification but also a concept of relationship.

By now the dilemma mentioned earlier should be becoming clear. On the one hand, we want the binomen to be constant and unchanging for a species. On the other, if we want it to represent a measure of relationship, it must be subject to change — to lumping or splitting — as knowledge about relationships grows. Ultimately, when the rainbow's end in taxonomy is reached, when all there is to know about the relationships between Australian birds is known, then the binomen will probably become a fixed constant. But not until then. I think, nevertheless, that it is fairly reasonable to say that the changes between now and then will be fewer than those between now and the past, at least for genera and species of Australian birds.

Taxonomic knowledge about Australian birds is still pitifully meagre. Only the species are moderately well known, revealing little advance from the time of Mathews. Subspecies and patterns of subspeciation are much more poorly understood than the literature suggests, as some recent papers in the journal *Emu* have shown (Ford 1974; Ford and Parker 1974). This is because most of the post-Mathews papers during the 1950s and 60s on subspeciation were based on extant collections in Australian and American museums. Specimens in these collections are either old and faded, or inadequately sexed and aged, or come from unrepresentative localities, or combine all of these factors. Very often a published geography of subspeciation is in reality a geography of collecting and may bear little relation to the situation in nature, as has been shown by Ford and Parker (1974) for the Grey Shrike-thrush group. Moreover, the two so-called white-breasted and buff-breasted races of the Sacred Kingfisher have no better basis than feather wear (Disney 1974). It is an unchallengeable fact that if a thoroughly reliable checklist of the birds of Australia based upon full and sound research is wanted, then the whole of Australia will have to be selectively re-collected.

At the levels of genera and families, the state of taxonomic flux is even greater, as has become

apparent from the papers given by Professor C. G. Sibley at the International Ornithological Congress (1974). Sibley's work has refocused attention on the questions of the relationships of the major elements in the Australian land bird fauna that taxonomists have been glossing over for years. The basic comparative studies needed to clarify these problems have simply never been done; nor are the prospects promising.

In the meantime, what can be done to stabilize nomenclature in the RAOU Checklist of the Birds of Australia? One solution is simply to fix the scientific binomen. For example, if *Hylacola pyrrhopygia* has been known by that name for say 50 years, it should remain so irrespective of whether it is shown to belong to the *Sericornis* generic group or not. I do not favour this view because it hampers the expression of relationships through a scientific nomenclature; and this surely is a central objective of taxonomic science.

Alternatively, it does seem possible that names can be stabilized by standardizing English names. Although this might seem like turning the full circle right back to using vernacular instead of scientific names as the international standard, might I point out that English names are not local names in the true sense. They are instead almost as international as scientific names themselves, for three reasons: first, most books about birds throughout the world, particularly the field guides, are published in English; second, people travel now as never before and between them English is the most common language; third, English has become the world's language for scientific communication. The guidelines for establishing English names are also much simpler than those for scientific names because they are based on little else than tradition and the requirement that names be species-specific for at least a major portion of the globe. Priority is subject not so much to incontrovertible rule as to gentleman's agreement.

Absolute agreement on the English name to be used for a given species throughout the world is well nigh impossible, but approximate agreement with sufficient precision for use in scientific publications can surely be approached. For example, it is obviously unacceptable to change our magpie to piping crow-shrike just because there is another magpie in Europe. The impasse can be solved easily, nevertheless, by calling our

bird the Australian Magpie and the European bird the European Magpie.

It is essential that the English names for birds should be species-specific if they are to be precise and unequivocal in a world sense. The principal changes in names to the passerines in the Interim List (1975) and those envisaged later this year for non-passerines are based on this requirement. Thus the small Australian *Ninox* should revert not only to Boobook because there is already a Spotted Owl in America, but also to Southern Boobook because there are other related species of boobooks in Papuasia.

Australians can, of course, easily ignore practices in English naming elsewhere and use their own system. This smacks of parochialism, is out of step with a general trend in English-written field guides throughout the world, and defeats the objective of achieving a stabilized English name as an alternative to a potentially changing scientific name. Australia is in fact in a position to provide, on an official checklist level, a lead here because, through some extraordinary circumstance, it is ahead of the United States and some other first- and second-world nations in compiling an up-to-date national checklist. For it to succeed, the lead must be given in the spirit of give-and-take. Thus, if we are to force Spangled Drongo and Dollar-bird on the rest of South-East Asia and India — which has been happening — we should be prepared to accept Clamorous Reed-warbler for our breeding population of *Acrocephalus stentoreus* and Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrike in lieu of Barred Cuckoo-shrike for *Coracina lineata*. Once the initial example and choice of "international" names has been made, however, the names should be maintained as fixedly as possible thereafter.

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R. Schodde,
C/- Division of Wildlife Research,
C.S.I.R.O., Lyneham, A.C.T.