

## REVIEWS

**Interim List of Australian Songbirds—Passerines**, by R. Schodde. Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, 1975. 46 + vi pp. Price \$3.00.

As it would take many years to satisfactorily organize the compilation and publication of Part Two of the Official R.A.O.U. *Checklist*, Dr Schodde was requested to compile an Interim List, to "remain in effect until the full treatment of Passerines, defining subspecies and their distribution, appears". The author, therefore, deserves our sincere thanks for accepting this request, and giving his time and knowledge so that a "modern" taxonomic list on Australian Passerines might be available so soon after the official non-passerine publication appeared. A few close associates are mentioned as the authority for a few families, but except for Maluridae and Ploceidae these contain relatively few species. In "Acknowledgements", various names are given comprising those who commented on an earlier provisional list and also for reading the manuscript, but it is apparent that the author is responsible for most of the final decisions.

Many will find it difficult to see close taxonomic connection and specific concept in the two publications. To substantiate this statement, 19 "species" of the 1926 *Checklist* became geographical races in Part 1, 18 further Australian endemics became forms of extra-limital species, and when I reviewed Part 1 (*Aust. Bird Bander* 13: 65-66) I mentioned 39 others for which a reference could readily be given for lumping, but which remained species. In this *Interim List* the respective figures are 65, 21 and 12! In 1926 there were 349 Non-passerines and 358 Passerines. In the two 1975 publications the figures are 393 and 307 (not including introductions). To bridge this surprising difference somewhat it must in fairness be emphasized that 41 Non-passerines were recorded in Australia for the first time during the intervening 50 years and only 8 Passerines, through the occurrence of extra-limital birds or newly-discovered species. These are *Pitta moluccensis*, *Motacilla alba*, *M. cinerea*, *M. citreola*, *Pomatostomus halli*, *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*, *Cisticola juncidis* and *Amytornis barbatus*. Four, which were considered subspecies in 1926, have since been given specific ranking—*Psophodes occidentalis*, *Sericornis kerri*, *Corvus mellori* and *C. tasmanicus*.

The general arrangement includes a Preface of 26 pp., mainly discussing recent taxonomic decisions and evaluating their significance. This provokes much thought and provides interesting data, but clearly emphasizes the arbitrariness of the whole system. There are far too many references to papers "in press" or "in prep.". Following the Preface, there is a brief discussion on vernaculars and a 6-page List of References follows. J. N. Hobbs has pointed out to me that

although "Hall (1974)" is perhaps the most-quoted reference, it is not mentioned in this List. The remaining 13 pp. contain the Interim List of Species, but in reality this has no higher status than a Name List.

So many instances of lumping of species is undesirable and probably unnecessary; it calls for much more extended study before taking such action. When I read the names of those who gave us the 1926 *Checklist*, it is hoped that a similar number of equally-talented ornithologists will soon compile an acceptable Third Edition. Lumping is readily evident in, e.g. *Pardalotus*, *Malurus*, *Sericornis* and *Neosittidae*. To make such a dogmatic statement that "there can be little doubt that [*Pardalotus*] *striatus*, *ornatus* and *substriatus* are conspecific" (p. 21), when able workers like Hindwood, Mayr, Salomonsen and many others clearly agree otherwise, needs a lot of explaining. The only change here should be a possible uniting of *ornatus* and *substriatus* on ample evidence of hybridization, and given the former Red-tipped vernacular. To include also *striatus* and *melanocephalus* as conspecific shows a noticeable lack of field work, or more probably a noticeable lack of research into what has been published. Any Sydney field-worker of more than average ability looks forward most winters to the large numbers of *P. striatus* which move in, and find that their different calls and field behaviour are so distinct from the local red-tipped birds that field-glasses are seldom used except for verification should others, less experienced, require this proof. *P. melanocephalus* is more different again, and surely some probable indication of hybridism is far less important than known breeding-range overlap.

Australian taxonomic work in recent years appears to so many ornithologists to be primarily over-zealous collecting in possible overlap zones and a "witch-hunt" for possible indications of hybridism, whilst field behaviour and, more important, a real effort to ascertain all plumage characteristics from immaturity to the fully adult bird, is far more commendable. These aspects should be of much greater value in making taxonomic decisions. The "down-grading" of so many Australian birds, which for so long have been considered species, and so much unnecessary name-changing requires at least a further ten years study before incorporation in a *Checklist*, especially one that the R.A.O.U. is expected to follow.

Veteran ornithologist, A. H. Chisholm, believes that John Gould was probably as sound a judge as anyone of what defines a species. Despite more than 100 years since his day, as well as a general acceptance of the polytypic species concept and its consequential impact on systematic nomenclature, scant regard for Gould's ability is implied when the four species of *sittella* he named as new have been "swallowed up" in this Interim List and the Variable *Sittella*, *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*

has emerged. Certainly it is well-named *Variable*, for no colour description is possible unless it starts thus—“Head: dark brown with throat pale; dark brown with throat black; white; white, noticeably streaked; grey, heavily streaked; black; black cap with white throat; all grey; etc.”, and it includes those from New Guinea, as it is clearly stated that the supplanted genus *Neositta* is monotypic.

Some of J. D. Macdonald's taxonomic papers, such as with *Colluricincla*, *Climacteris* and *Neositta*, appear to have been hastily cast aside; this further supports the widely-discussed belief that those where hybrids have “ensured” conspecificness, such as with *Meliphaga melanops*, *Sphecotheres*, *Cinclosoma cinnamomeum*, *Malurus*, *Coracina*, *Neositta*, etc., have been hastily incorporated. Some of these are so recent that there has been no possibility of refuting the arguments. In case my personal views might be considered an isolated opinion, I quote some unsolicited comments by two able overseas taxonomists in letters recently received: (1) — “In some cases a whole lot of reasons are given for lumping something, but when you analyse the characters they tend to be quite superficially adaptive, and hence meaningless, or are ones that occur in a wide range of groups. The annoying feature is that the changes are made, then you have to spend a couple of years correcting them.” From the second letter — “I am afraid they are going a little too far in their lumping. The main purpose of a classification is to convey information but if you lump too much you actually conceal that information”.

There has been no serious attempt by Australian workers to adopt a superspecies concept, and retain arbitrary specific definitions. Mayr and Short (*Species Taxa of North American Birds*, 1970) discuss many instances of superspecies, of which *Himantopus*, often considered monospecific, might be quoted as an example. They consider it is better to retain eight species, “believing that this is a better course than partial, dubious lumping with insufficient knowledge”. Surely that reason applies equally with, e.g. the small Australasian genus *Sphecotheres*. Ford's review of it (*Emu* 75: 163-171) appeared about the same time as the *Interim List*, which accepts his monospecific concept. But surely Greenway's treatment (Peters' *Checklist* 15: 136-137) of *flaviventris*, *viridis* and *hypoleucus* forming a superspecies and *vieilloti* co-existent with such over part of its range from southern New Guinea to New South Wales makes better sense, especially as all age plumages of both types are still imperfectly known.

Uniformity and a standard concept throughout should be the main objective of any Checklist. Therefore if the characters, or “yard-stick” which influenced the author of this *Interim List* to retain, e.g. *Eopsaltria griseogularis*, *Psophodes occidentalis*, *Climacteris minor*, *Ptiloris victoriae* and *Corvus tasmanicus* (and I aver there are good grounds for each) as species, were followed throughout, then a high percentage of the 65 which have been merged have just as sound a reason for retention also. No one will disagree that *Meliphaga melanops* and *M. cassidix* are closely related, but why lump them on what is still inconclusive evidence, or, if you wish, on the evidence of one published article. The two form a perfect superspecies, just as do *M. leucotis* and *M. flavicollis*.

There are additional surprises both at the generic and family level. The treatment in *Sericornis* indicates that it is the “carpet-bag” into which it is convenient to sweep all those annoying, mostly monotypic warbler genera. Also, if *Meliphaga* is “an unwieldly and possibly unnatural assemblage”, I and many others are certain that by retaining four species only in it and moving all 17 others into *Lichenostomus*, a genus that probably only Mathews has used seriously in the past 100 years, does not clarify the position one iota. In fact by causing a generic change for 17 species it merely mocks nomenclatural stability, which should be a paramount objective of any Checklist. Why did Ernst Mayr prefer to retain *Pachycephala caledonica* as a species when its distinctive differences are clearly debatable, and not cause a forced name change in the 70 or more races of *P. pectoralis* in Peters' *Checklist*, vol. 12? And why was the genus *Seisura* suppressed by the International Commission when it was merged with *Myiagra*? Surely this was for nomenclatural stability.

I can foresee some overseas criticism through the thrushes becoming a subfamily of the flycatchers. They are a large group poorly represented in Australia which in this *Interim List* holds a systematic rank equal to groups like Pomatostominae and Dasyornithinae, whilst at the same time Sylviidae, Maluridae, Acanthizidae and Ephthianuridae are given the status of families. It is even harder to understand why the whistlers do not even receive subfamily ranking.

Some vernacular changes are sound, like Yellow-spotted Honeyeater and Metallic Starling, but others are weak, such as Zitting Cisticola and Grey-fronted Honeyeater. There is too much retention of disused names, such as New Holland Honeyeater, Southern Scrub-robin, Bower's Shrike-thrush, white-eye and chowchilla. Western Warbler is retained despite the fact that it is just as much eastern as western, whilst White-tailed is far more descriptive and has long been in use. Surely Yellow-hooded Wagtail is unwarranted, for if the commonly-used Yellow-headed needs to be replaced then Citrine Wagtail is sound. It is annoying to find little effort has been made to eliminate those unwarranted personal names in vernacular titles such as Hall's Babbler, Richard's Pipit and Macleay's Honeyeater. However, White's Thrush is supplanted by Scaly Thrush, and even though I can foresee much criticism I rejoice that at least an attempt was made in the right direction.

Although a careful checking of the text was not an intention in this review, some errors are eye-catching, among which are “thoat” for throat (p. 19), “Dilimitation” for delimitation (p. 19), “The sequence of genera and species of is rather different” (p. 20), “(Refinesque)” for (*Rafinesque*) p. 29, “Cuckoo-strike” for Cuckoo-shrike (p. 35), “*Daphoenostta*” for *Daphoenositta* (p. 40), “*valididrostris*” for *validirostris* (p. 41) and “*quadrigintus*” for *quadragintus* (p. 43).

Whilst many eagerly awaited the arrival of the first official list of passerines in Australia since 1926, I already know from conversation, correspondence and ornithological meetings that there is a tremendous amount of indignant opposition to it. Many aver that the CSIRO *Index of Australian Bird Names* (1969) is preferable. Whether the editors of our various parochial publications will fully accept the *Interim List* remains to be known.

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**Every Australian Bird Illustrated.** Rigby Ltd. Adelaide 1975. Pp. 319, col. pl. 692, b. & w. pl. 23, 320 mm x 240 mm. Price \$Aust.24.95.

Every Australian bird is no doubt illustrated here; many in photographs, many in washed-out reproductions, substantially reduced in size from Gould, Cayley, Broinowski & Mathews, and a few in modern paintings by Margot Krøyer-Pedersen and Peter Trusler. This book will be valued for the photographs and modern paintings; the older reproductions serve to swell the number of species illustrated, but detract from the volume as a whole.

The text is discursive, and of little value for the serious student of birds; and this not only because the publishers have not seen fit to supply the name of any author. The identification of the species photographed is stated to have been checked by members of the Adelaide Ornithologists Club; but no authority at all is given for the text.

Many of the photographs are spectacular, and a surprising number have been taken away from the nest. Some appear to have been taken outside Australia. Understandably a number are of aviary, hand-held, or otherwise captive birds, and unfortunately some show obvious effects of handling.

The price is grossly excessive for what must be regarded purely as a picture book.

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## Recovery Data

Items for Recovery Round-up are obtained from:

1. The Secretary, Aust. Bird-banding Scheme
2. Individual banders
3. Miscellaneous sources.

The Secretary of the ABBS kindly provides most of the data involving recoveries away from the banding place and these constitute the largest part of Recovery Round-up. However, for a number of reasons, longevity information is not readily available from this source. Most longevity

items included in Recovery Round-up are forwarded by a few banders in response to previous requests.

Banders are asked to forward to me details of longevity items which they consider may be suitable for inclusion in this section. As a guide in deciding suitability, items for the particular species should be checked in recent issues. If in doubt send the details anyway.

Hon. Editor