

Taxonomy and the AOU Checklist: Reasons for Changes in the Seventh Edition

By Douglas Stotz

For years at a time, scientists working on the taxonomy of birds can discuss issues and revise our taxonomic knowledge of North American birds, and little attention is paid to these activities by other scientists and the army of birders in North America. However, the AOU checklist committee, of which I am a newly appointed member, a group of seven to ten ornithologists appointed by the American Ornithologists' Union, the oldest, most prestigious scientific ornithological organization in North America, produces a new Checklist of North American Birds at irregular intervals of 15 to 20 years. When this happens, it has far-reaching effects. This checklist is an unusual entity, a semi-official taxonomy of a group of organisms. No other taxonomic group has anything like it. For scientists, it provides a taxonomy that most will immediately adopt in their work. Most ornithological journals in North America require its taxonomy be followed in any papers published in that journal. For specialists in most fields of science, it means when they work with birds, they have a reliable authority for determining with what species they are working and what to call those species. For the birder, it affects the English names we use, the order of species in our field guides and, perhaps most importantly, the number of species on our life lists.

Last summer, the seventh edition was published (AOU 1998). It covers 2008 North American species, including Middle America south through Panama, as well as the Hawaiian Islands. Since amateur birding

I remember as a high school student in 1973 losing nine species from my life list based on the decisions of the checklist committee (AOU 1973). In return, I got a new grackle and the chance to add Thayer's Gull and Alder Flycatcher to my life list.



*Drawing of Blue-headed Vireo by Denis Kania. The Seventh Edition of the AOU Checklist split Solitary Vireo into three species. One of them is the Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*) of eastern North America.*