

INSIDE THE ABA CHECKLIST COMMITTEE

Who, What, and Why

The ABA Checklist Committee (CLC) makes decisions that affect most ABA members—and many birders overall. According to the ABA bylaws, the purposes of the CLC are as follows:

The Checklist Committee shall assemble for publication a master checklist of the birds of North America. ... The checklist shall be revised from time to time by the Committee, and shall serve as the basis for all North American Life Lists and other types of lists recognized by the Association for areas that include, or are included by, North America as delineated herein. The Committee shall consist of five or more members and shall file its report annually with the board of directors.

Following an amendment to the CLC bylaws in 1997, the Committee now contains eight members. Each member serves a four-year term that may be renewed once, meaning that a member may serve for up to eight consecutive years. Afterward, each member must remain off the Committee for at least one year before being eligible for reelection. Terms are staggered so that each year two CLC members must either cycle off the Committee or be reelected (if applicable). Potential CLC members are nominated by current Committee members, and their election must be approved by the

ABA Board. The chair of the Committee is elected annually and must step down when his or her term expires. Current CLC members are chair Bill Pranty (Florida), Jon Dunn (California), Steve Heintl (Alaska), Andrew Kratter (Florida), Paul Lehman (New Jersey), Mark Lockwood (Texas),

Bruce Mactavish (Newfoundland), and Kevin Zimmer (Arizona). The terms of Heintl and Mactavish expire in October 2006.

Despite a widely held misperception to the contrary, the CLC does not determine the “countability” of a particular bird or observation—that is the responsibility of the ABA Recording Standards and Ethics Committee

chaired by Tony White. Rather, the purpose of the CLC is to determine whether the documentation provided for an observation is sufficient to add a bird to the ABA list (in all but two cases—Fea’s/Zino’s and Galapagos/Hawaiian Petrels—as a species) or whether to change the code of a species. The current (sixth) edition of the *ABA Checklist* was published in 2002. Jon Dunn and the other CLC members are currently revising the *Checklist*, with publication of the seventh edition anticipated by the end of 2006.

Inasmuch as the ABA Checklist Committee automatically accepts all changes in taxonomy and nomenclature that are made by the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists’ Union, many birders may wonder about the relevance of the CLC. The existence of the ABA CLC has been validated and encouraged by the AOU’s committee. In addition to the two purposes of the CLC stated in the ABA bylaws—to assemble and periodically update a master list of the birds of the ABA Area—the Committee also serves several other functions. Among these are: (1) to share information and work with the AOU’s Checklist Committee on reports new to the ABA Area (the 49 continental United States, Canada, the French islands of St. Pierre et Miquelon, and adjacent waters up to 200 miles offshore or half the distance to a neighboring country, whichever is less); (2) to review and reevaluate the status of birds on the *ABA Checklist* as necessary; and (3) to publish in *Birding* an annual report on the actions of the CLC. The Committee also annually updates an online version of the *ABA Checklist* available at americanbirding.org/checklist/index.html and answers questions from ABA members published in *Birding* or sent via e-mail.

Like other bird records committees, the CLC maintains the status quo regarding the status and distribution of species until a change to the list is recommended. Typically this recommendation is published in a national, regional, or state ornithological journal such as *North American Birds* or *Western Birds*. In addition to providing relevant details surrounding an observation new to a state, country, or the ABA Area, a publication

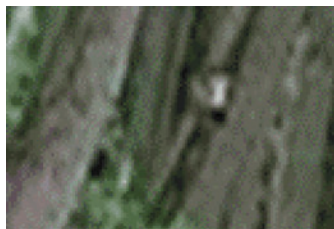
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serves as an archive and usually includes supporting photographs and/or sonograms.

Letters to the editor concerning the ABA CLC have been published in *Birding* for more than 30 years. Although numerous topics have been discussed, ever-changing taxonomy has been a frequent topic. Some birders wonder why the ABA CLC does not adopt a “stable list” in which no change in the taxonomic order would be permitted, or as Burton Guttman stated in a commentary in the February 2004 issue of *Birding* (pp. 46–49) “...the listing aspect of birding should be divorced from systematic ornithology.” However, members of the CLC feel strongly that the ABA *Checklist* should maintain its dependence on ornithology, which like other natural sciences is not static, and where new knowledge is constantly being learned and applied in a variety of ways. Species are “lumped” or “split” as their relationships are better known from DNA and other studies, and several other factors (such as vagrancy of native species and the establishment of exotics) affect species on the *Checklist*. Members of the CLC suspect that a majority of the ABA membership understands and accepts the need to revise the ABA *Checklist* based on new data.

As with members of other records committees, members of the CLC consider several factors when assessing a report. First of course is identification: The identification to species and often to subspecies must be determined conclusively. But other factors involving a report must also be considered. Chief among these is provenance—the likelihood that a bird from somewhere else made its way to the ABA Area naturally versus the possibility (or probability) that it escaped from captivity locally. Because the provenance of few birds can be proven (by leg bands or other markers), members of records committees must make a judgment based on factors such as the bird’s native range and the likelihood of its surviving a trip, along with its normal migration patterns, history of vagrancy, overall condition, and especially its likelihood of having been kept in captivity. After considering these and perhaps other factors concerning a potential vagrant, records committee members render a conservative judgment based on



The **Ivory-billed Woodpecker** is currently classified as a Code 6 species (“cannot be found”) by the ABA Checklist Committee. If definitive evidence of its occurrence were to be published and then evaluated by the Committee, the status of the species would be changed to Code 3 (“rare”). The bird in this videograb is judged by some authorities to be an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, but the Committee has not endorsed that judgment. *Brinkley, Arkansas; April 2004.* © David Luneau.

the strength of the evidence provided. The example below explains the decisions made by CLC members when reviewing a record of a bird that could have been either a native vagrant or an escapee.

Thick-billed Parrot: A Case Study

On 7 May 2003, a Thick-billed Parrot was discovered in a small grove of exotic

pinus on a private ranch at Engle, New Mexico. Except for a four-day period when it seemed to be absent, the parrot was present at the ranch until 23 June 2003 and was observed by more than 500 birders from 34 states and six countries. The identification of the parrot was unquestioned, but its provenance was a matter of extensive discussion. After more than a year of deliberation, the New Mexico Bird Records Committee (NMBRC) rejected the record by a vote of 6-1 on the basis of questionable provenance. The Thick-billed Parrot was already on the ABA *Checklist* based on wild birds documented in southeastern Arizona during the early 20th century. However, the last wild Thick-billed Parrot in the ABA Area was seen in 1938, so the species has been considered extirpated. Thus, the 2003 New Mexico parrot record was reviewed by the ABA CLC because its acceptance would change its status from Code 6 (“cannot be found”) to Code 5 (“accidental”). The CLC reviewed the NMBRC’s entire extensive file on the Thick-billed Parrot record from New Mexico and unanimously supported the NMBRC’s decision to reject the record on the basis of provenance. Here, I detail the discussion that this record generated by CLC members in greater detail than can be provided in the annual CLC reports published in *Birding*.

Native Range: The Thick-billed Parrot is considered by BirdLife International to be an endangered species whose range and numbers likely still are declining. Currently, it occurs as far north as northern Chihuahua, within 200 miles of Engle, New Mexico. However, there has been no documented record of a Thick-billed Parrot within the United States in more than 65 years (excepting a failed reintroduction program in Arizona, 1986–1993). Furthermore, there is no verifiable record of a Thick-billed Parrot from New Mexico,



The ABA Checklist Committee will soon evaluate the record of a well-documented **Red-footed Falcon** (*Falco vespertinus*) in eastern Massachusetts, the first ever reported in North America. The committee will evaluate both the identity of the bird and the matter of its origin—for example, might it have been ship-assisted? *Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; 10 August 2004.* © Jeremiah Trimble.

although there are sight reports from the early 20th century.

Habitat: The Thick-billed Parrot is a highland species, occupying old-growth montane pine forests. A ranch in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert lowlands is a very unlikely habitat for a wild parrot, which would have had to have traversed at least 200 miles of unsuitable habitat to arrive at Engle. Furthermore, a natural vagrant from Mexico would have passed, and probably would have settled in, suitable montane habitat between Chihuahua and Engle.

Arrival Date: The northernmost population of the Thick-billed Parrot is migratory, arriving on the breeding grounds around the first week of June. The Engle parrot was first seen on 7 May, three or four weeks earlier than the “expected” arrival date for a wild parrot in Chihuahua.

Behavior: The Engle parrot was tame, allowing humans to approach within 25–30 feet. At least one observer felt that the parrot occasionally moved towards humans, which indicated possible previous captivity. However, Thick-billed Parrots seem to be naturally unwary at times. Furthermore, the Engle parrot refused parrot food that was offered to it, but instead foraged extensively on pine cones, which are its primary natural food. Because parrots are social animals that are seldom seen alone, some CLC members felt that a single parrot was more likely to be an escapee, and that vagrant parrots would be more likely to be seen in small flocks, as was the case with the early 20th-century records from Arizona.

Plumage condition: The plumage of the Engle parrot showed little wear and only a few missing flight feathers on one wing. There was no evidence of cage wear or damage. One parrot researcher examined photographs of the Engle parrot and thought that she could see evidence of recent human handling, but some CLC members were uncertain whether such feather condition could be detected or identified from photographs. Stable isotope analysis of a parrot feather salvaged from the ranch in June 2003 was inconclusive, suggesting that the feather could have been grown anywhere in a broad band ranging from southeastern Colorado to central Mexico.

Weather Conditions: Although storm-assisted vagrancy is easy to detect with pelagic species, it is often very difficult to correlate weather conditions with single landbirds (as opposed to large fallouts of landbirds that may include vagrants). Although some observers of the Engle parrot mentioned that northern Mexico experienced “tornado-like”

winds the week prior to the parrot’s discovery at Engle, CLC members considered it difficult to imagine a scenario in which a parrot would be safely transported 200 or more miles by strong winds. (Strong winds do not pluck birds out of trees and transport them—miraculously unhurt—hundreds or thousands of miles away). Other observers mentioned a poor pine crop locally and hypothesized that the Engle parrot might have been a wild individual wandering widely in search of food. CLC members considered this scenario to be a very remote possibility given the parrot’s location in the middle of a desert.



The identity of this **Thick-billed Parrot**, which showed up in New Mexico in 2003, has not been questioned by the ABA Checklist Committee. However, the Committee has questioned the bird’s origin and has determined that the bird was probably an escapee. Therefore, the Thick-billed Parrot remains a Code 6 species on the ABA Checklist. Engle, New Mexico; June 2003. © Christopher L. Wood.

Provenance: As with some waterfowl, raptors, and songbirds, the possibility of an extralimital psittacid’s being an escapee must be considered. Except possibly for the lack of obvious cage wear or damage, there was no strong evidence that the Engle parrot was a vagrant. However, several factors, including those listed above, suggested an escapee. Another point in favor of its being an escapee is that a railroad line and an interstate highway both pass within a few hundred feet of the pine grove on the ranch. This line and road both lead to El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, two cities known for receiving smuggled psittacids. Thick-billed

Parrots are known targets of psittacid smugglers—74% of the 88 Thick-billed Parrots that comprised the reintroduction flock were wild-caught individuals confiscated from smugglers. There are also several Thick-billed Parrots at the El Paso Zoo. For these reasons, members of the ABA CLC and the New Mexico Bird Records Committee voted against natural vagrancy as the explanation for a Thick-billed Parrot visiting a ranch in the Chihuahuan Desert in southwestern New Mexico.

Although some birders may be disappointed by the decisions made by members of the New Mexico Bird Records Committee and the ABA CLC regarding the recent Thick-billed Parrot record, the votes were in line with the conservative stance usually taken by records committees (i.e., “if in doubt, leave it out”). Furthermore, all decisions made by the CLC are open to reevaluation should additional information become available.

Acknowledgment

I thank Sartor O. Williams III, secretary of the New Mexico Bird Records Committee, for providing the ABA Checklist Committee with extensive information about the Engle Thick-billed Parrot.