

The Taming of the Mew

by Sarah Toner

My life list is a wild place, where Gray-headed Chachalacas mingle next to Ruddy Ducks, where Black-breasted Wood-quails stand proudly, trying to avoid the common Ring-necked Pheasants placed next to them. I have yet to see a rarer Himalayan Snowcock that would provide the Wood-quails with better company. Of the Shearwaters and Petrels, nothing but empty boxes, waiting to be filled in with the iconic black check when I go on my first pelagic.

Below them, Wild Turkey and Pacific Loon are placed next to each other! In nature they would be completely apart, and unable to hatch sneaky plans together! Those two crazy birds are a loony combination and must be separated, but with what, I do not know. Could it be a Mountain Quail, or maybe a Gambel's Quail? Could I possibly see the teardrop on the California Quail's head, and place the inky black check mark on the box next to its name? It would separate the Turkey and the Loon, and keep them in check.

The Gray-necked Wood-rail is insulted by being placed next to the ordinary Sora, and although I try to calm him by telling him that the Sora is just as stealthy as he, and that they are, after all, in the same family, he refuses my help, and wishes to be placed next to the much rarer Corn Crake. I try to explain to him that the crake has been recorded only 5 times in North America since 1928 (Alderfer, 163), and it would take an extraordinary stroke of luck to see one, but he continues to sulk. Maybe he's just a rail and can't help acting this way, but I don't want him to try to leave my list. Our good relations would be in jeopardy.

He cannot leave it anyway, as he is bound by the black check, the one thing on my life list that all the birds, with their varied plumages and shapes, share. With all these variations, there are very few ways for me to settle fights. The easiest official way is to see a bird listed between the two disgruntled species and drive the check between them. I feel badly for the birds who are

stuck together unhappily, with no other species to act as an intermediary. The Semipalmated Plover doesn't agree with the Piping Plover's views on the "perfect beach," yet their two boxes cannot be separated, unless the Semipalmated Plover is, against all odds, split into two species.

Even the distinction between other species is uncertain. We no longer have just one Whip-poor-will, according to Bill Maynard, but we have two instead, and three species of "Winter Wren"! Maybe someday the new Eurasian Wren will visit a location where I can go and add it to my list. Every year, however, more visitors come once, are placed on the grand list, and never return, keeping that check off my life list. Not only does the wood-rail's Corn Crake still elude me, but the species changes also keep me hopping.

Even when my life list order and number is unchanged, there are still ways for my field guide to be out of date. Shuffling around the scientific order of the *Vermivora* warblers, changing bird's scientific names, and renaming birds all force me to run out and buy an updated guide, or hunch over all my guides sorting out the changes and penciling in the corrections. Which birds in the Peterson's Eastern guide have been changed? Where do I put the info that an entire family of birds has been split? What about noting the changes to any European birds when I have no European field guide?

Even more confusing are the distinctions on the lists that birders make themselves. Do you count heard birds? Does identifying a bird from a photo you took earlier count? What about if you know the bird was in the flock, but all you saw was the flock? The din of birds jabbering and arguing on my life list grows louder. I panic, open up Ebird, and click the "Alphabetical" button. "Phew," I say to myself, as the birds shuffle around into their new order, and all is quiet.

Uh-oh. Bay-headed Tanager protests loudly as it realizes it has been placed next to an ordinary Belted Kingfisher. The ever-annoying Black-breasted Wood-quail is even more insulted than it was in taxonomical order by being next to Black-capped Chickadee, as is the Black-cheeked Woodpecker. The Kirtland's Warbler is irked by being next to Killdeer, and makes sure I know about it. The Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant is miffed at being placed next to a "lowly"

Scarlet Tanager. I frantically look around. Of all the options to sort by, which one will cause the least dispute? Location? Date? State? I take one last look at the scene of total uproar and run away from the computer. Maybe I should just see every bird in the world, and put enough check-padding in between the birds to quiet the clamor, or at least stifle the squawking.

Works Cited

Alderfer, Jonathan. *Complete Birds of North America*: Washington D.C, National Geographic Society, 2006. Print.

Maynard, Bill. “*Latest News from the AOU.*” Weblog post. Peeps Online. 27 Jul. 2010. <http://birding.typepad.com/peeps/2010/07/latest-news-from-the-aou.html>