

Standardizing the Classification of North American Birds for Research and Conservation



The Gunnison Sage-Grouse *Centrocercus minimus* was first recognized in 2000 as a species distinct from the closely related Greater Sage-Grouse *C. urophasianus*. It has now been listed as Endangered due to its small population size, a fact not apparent when it was treated as the same species as the Greater Sage-Grouse.



Photo Credit: Mikey Lutmerding

When is a tanager not a tanager? Based on new genetic data, the committee has transferred many species of tanagers (including this Summer Tanager), cardinals, and sparrows to different families in recent years, changes that have serious implications for scientists studying these birds.



Photo Credit: Jack Jeffrey Photography

Many native Hawaiian forest birds, including the Akepa, have undergone steep population declines. The committee split the Akepa into three species in 2015, recognizing the uniqueness of the highly endangered populations on the islands of Hawaii, Maui, and Oahu.

The Challenge: Federal and state government agencies, NGOs, scientists, and authors of field guides and other literature need a standardized classification of birds to provide the taxonomic and nomenclatural foundation for bird research, conservation, and education in North America. These public agencies, private individuals, and organizations rely on the latest developments in systematics, taxonomy, and classification to determine the appropriate units for scientific study and conservation. The challenge is to incorporate the latest science into current classifications so that they can guide scientific and management activities.

The Science: The American Ornithologists' Union formed the AOU Committee on Classification and Nomenclature to provide a standard taxonomy for the birds of North America. This committee, established in 1883, has been chaired by Patuxent scientists for the past 20 years. The committee evaluates and codifies the latest scientific developments in the systematics of North American birds, based on scientific research both by committee members and outside researchers. Decisions of the committee provide the standard taxonomic and nomenclatural foundation for resource managers, scientists, and the public. The committee publishes the *AOU Checklist of North American Birds* and its annual supplements, which are relied on as the authority on North American avian diversity and classification, and provide an authoritative reference for the implementation of legislative and management mandates.

The Future: Knowledge of avian diversity, systematics, and taxonomy is increasing at an unprecedented rate, as new types of data and new methodologies provide better and more accurate scientific information on species limits, evolutionary relationships, and other aspects of bird systematics. The committee will continue to conduct and evaluate scientific research and translate the results into a framework for use by DOI and other government agencies, research scientists, NGOs, and others. The committee will periodically publish new editions of the *AOU Checklist of North American Birds* and will update the Checklist through annual supplements published in the scientific journal *The Auk: Ornithological Advances*. These publications will continue to inform resource management, scientific study, education, and other activities that promote the conservation and well-being of North American birds.