

Report of the ABA Checklist Committee for 1984-1985

In the past we have published the annual Supplement to the ABA Checklist, giving only the results of the Committee's deliberations. However, many members have inquired about the process by means of which the decisions are made. Are the annual changes mere whims of a few elitists whose major function is to foul up thousands of lifelists? Are these people just coming up with arbitrary opinions to satisfy their own egos? Or do they actually work at this difficult problem? We have decided to intercept just a few of the communications among this year's Committee so that our members can gain some sense of the scholarly investment which these dedicated experts make in their annual search for an accurate, correct, and defensible List of the birds which have positively occurred in the ABA Checklist Area.

The ABA Checklist Committee completed detailed reviews of the first substantiated records of four species and has approved their addition to the *ABA Checklist*:

- Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*)
- Caribbean Elaenia (*Elaenia martinica*)
- Brown-chested Martin (*Phaeoprogne tapera*)
- Yucatan Vireo (*Vireo magister*)

Discussions

Little Curlew, *Numenius minutus*

Where: Santa Maria (Santa Barbara Co.), California.

When: September 16 to October 14, 1984.

Observers: P. Lehman, D. Roberson, G. McCaskie.

Published Details: *American Birds* 39: 251-254; *Birding* 17:15-18.

Documentation: Photos; detailed field descriptions by Lehman, McCaskie, Roberson.

VIREO/ABA Records File: Photos by S. LaFrance.

Expert Opinions: J. Farrand and S. Moon (Wales).

Identification: "The most convincing details are (1) the (small) size of the bird as

judged in comparison with Lesser Golden-Plovers and Killdeers; (2) its slender build and small-headed look; (3) the shortness and relative lack of curvature of the bill; (4) the extensive pale area at the base of the bill; (5) the presence of fine streaks, rather than chevrons, on the breast; (6) the overall lack of buff coloration; and (7) the 'off-white', rather than cinnamon, wing-linings."

Of the characters listed above, the ones which rule out Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*) are Nos. 4, 5, 6, and 7. All of these characters except the last are visible in the photographs, a fact that provides confirmation of the written descriptions and also makes possible future verification of the record. The delicate proportions and the buff color of the eyebrow mitigate against the bird's being a "runt" Whimbrel. The delicate proportions and the lack of buff tones mitigate against the unlikely possibility of an extreme "runt" Long-billed Curlew. [Courtesy J. Farrand, comments (edited) in letter of March 29, 1985.]

Motion to Add: Small/McCaskie.

Vote: 9 For, 1 Against, 1 Abstain.

Dissenting Opinion: Descriptions do not completely eliminate the possibility of a runt Whimbrel.

Brown-chested Martin, *Phaeoprogne tapera*

Where: Monomoy Island (Barnstable Co.), Massachusetts.

When: June 12, 1983.

Observers: Blair Nikula, D. Holt, Wayne Petersen.

Published Details: *American Birds* 37:969.

Documentation: Specimen at Smithsonian Institution (NMNH #599678).

VIREO/ABA Records File: Photo by B. Nikula.

Expert Opinions: Specimen identification verified by M.R. Browning and K. Kaufman.

Identification: The specimen is a well-marked immature of the migratory southern race *P. t. fusca*, with a clear demarcation between the white throat and the brown breast-band and prominent blackish-brown spots on the white lower breast and upper belly. None of the brownish martins of the Southern Hemisphere duplicates the distinctive ventral pattern of this species. [Courtesy K. Kaufman, written comments (edited) of June 5, 1985.]

Motion to Add: Vickery/Gill.

Vote: 11 For, 0 Against.

Dissenting Opinion: None.

Yucatan Vireo, *Vireo magister*

Where: Bolivar Peninsula (Galveston Co.), Texas.

When: April 29 to May 31, 1984.

Observers: J.G. Massey, J.G. Morgan, T.L. Eubanks, V. Eubanks, L. White, R.A. Behrstock, D. E. Wolf.

Published Details: *American Birds* 39: 245-6.

Documentation: Photograph; banding measurements; detailed field description.

VIREO/ABA Records File: Photos by D. Cunningham, R. Behrstock, G. Lasley.

Expert Opinions: J. Barlow, K.C. Parkes.

Identification: The other vireos with which this species might be confused are the Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus*) and the *flavoviridis* group of Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*).

The drab color and the prominent dark loral stripe separate the Texas bird from Red-eyed Vireos. Warbling Vireos are smaller, proportionally smaller-billed, and lack the prominent dark loral stripe. Black-whiskered Vireo resembles Yucatan Vireo in being heavy-billed and drab in color, some individuals having only faint dark malar stripes. But Black-whiskered Vireos lack the combination of a very bold dark loral stripe and no apparent malar stripe evident on the Texas bird. Also, the Texas bird was duskiest and more monochrome overall than are normal Black-whiskered Vireos. [Courtesy K. Kaufman, written comments (edited) of January 1985.]

Motion to Add: Tucker/Gill.

Vote: 11 For, 0 Against.

Dissenting Opinion: None.

Caribbean Elaenia, *Elaenia martinica*

Where: West end of Santa Rosa Island (Escambia Co.), Florida.

When: April 28, 1984.

Observers: E.V. Barbig, H.T. Barbig, F.T. Griffin, R.A. Duncan, O. Fang, S. Duncan.

Published Details: *American Birds* 38:923.

Documentation: Photo; description of song; detailed field description by Barbig and Griffin.

VIREO/ABA Records File: Photo by R.A. Duncan.

Expert Opinions: R. Ridgely, M. Robins, J. Bond, J. Fitzpatrick.

Identification: This record really put the Checklist Committee to the test. Not only is this an extremely difficult group of flycatchers to identify in the field, but also the documentary evidence was marginal in quality. We were unwilling to assume that

this flycatcher necessarily came from the nearby West Indies or Mexico, realizing that it could have been any one of many possible Neotropical flycatchers. In addition to the field descriptions and the rather poor photograph, the Committee had the benefit of critical reviews by experts on this and related Neotropical flycatchers (names given above).

The Committee thus faced three separate questions: Was the identification correct—or only 99% so? Was a 99% probability good enough? Was the supporting documentation adequate?

Presented here are (1) a critical review of the identification by Dr. John W. Fitzpatrick, (2) a dissenting opinion by Dan Gibson, and (3) Kenn Kaufman's soul-searching evaluation, which summarizes the majority opinion of this Committee. Not included here is Bob Ridgely's reply to John Fitzpatrick's query, in which he stated that the voice of *Elaenia albiceps* is *unlike* that described for the vagrant individual.

(1) Fitzpatrick's letter (see Appendix).

(2) Gibson dissenting opinion: "The expert testimony which we have read certainly makes clear that, for several reasons, the *Elaenia* is not at all *likely* to have been any species but *martinica*. But 99% is just not good enough. If we had an appendix of 'unsubstantiated' or 'hypothetical' species, as does the *AOU Check-list*, I would vote to place *Elaenia martinica* in such an appendix, until such time as it can be unequivocally added to the avifauna of our checklist area."

(3) Comments on Record of Caribbean *Elaenia* in Florida, 1984, by Kenn Kaufman: "This is probably one of the most difficult records that we will ever have to consider. It requires two decisions: (1) Am I convinced that the bird was a Caribbean *Elaenia*?, and (2) Is the record defensible enough that I can vote for it? These two questions are sufficiently different that I will address them separately."

1. Identification. "The identification has to be based almost entirely on one rather poor photograph (backed up by some brief plumage descriptions) and on one good voice description (backed up by other

observer notes that concur). I believe that the photo does place the bird in a subset of the genus *Elaenia*, and that the voice description rules out all species of *Elaenia* but *E. martinica*. I am familiar with several species of *Elaenia* (and have seen *E. martinica* in Mexico almost annually since 1977) and have some acquaintance with many other genera of tropical flycatchers, and I feel that the photo establishes the bird as an *Elaenia*: there is sufficient discussion of this generic placement in the written commentary from Fitzpatrick, Ridgely, Robbins, and Bond. The careful voice description provided by Evelyn Barbig for the Florida bird is a good match for some of my transcriptions of *E. martinica* song from Cozumel. The critical element here is the assurance (gleaned from the notes of Fitzpatrick, Ridgely, and others) that no similar species gives a vocalization that would fit this description. Voice would not seem such a convincing character if the Florida bird had called only once or twice, or only under stress, but it was evidently singing all afternoon. The identification as Caribbean *Elaenia* is indicated by voice, and is backed up by the known details of plumage and behavior. The proximity of the species' range is not a factor in the identification; a migratory species from South America would be as likely as a sedentary Caribbean bird, and even a non-migratory species could have reached Florida on a boat."

2. Acceptance with Slim Documentation. "I believe that any accepted record must be based upon solid evidence of some kind, evidence that remains available for re-evaluation in the future. In that regard, the current record presents a borderline case. We have a photo to prove that the bird was either a Caribbean *Elaenia* or something very similar. And we have voice descriptions which, *if accepted*, prove that the bird was indeed a Caribbean *Elaenia*. So . . . do the voice descriptions qualify as solid evidence?"

"My judgment is that they do. We have descriptions that indicate pattern, tone quality, and approximate pitch; fifty years from now it will still be possible for experts to compare these descriptions to all known

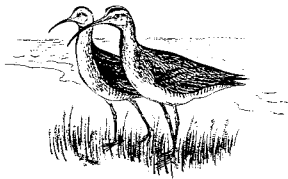
Elaenia vocalizations and say whether or not the identification is conclusive. Of course, this outcome requires that we believe the descriptions. But there is always an element of faith involved: even with distributional records backed by specimens we have to simply believe the locality data entered on the label by the collector. (This assumption is not always safe—the specimen record includes many cases of accidental mislabeling and a few instances of outright fraud.) In the present case several observers agreed on the voice of the bird, and there is no reason to doubt them.

“In summary, I believe that the record has received proper scrutiny from the leading experts in the field, and that they have effectively considered and ruled out every similar species, confirming the Florida bird as a Caribbean *Elaenia*. Although the nature of the evidence makes this a borderline case, for me it falls on the positive side of the line, and I am voting to accept the record.”

Motion to Add: Sykes/Tucker. (Revote)

Vote: 9 For, 1 Against, 1 Abstain.

Dissenting Opinion: (Given above.)



Other Business

Now under review by the Checklist Committee are the following 16 species, on any and each of which we welcome written opinions and/or documentary evidence from ABA members:

Eurasian Jackdaw	Great Frigatebird
Flame-colored Tanager	Rufous Turtle-Dove
Greenish Elaenia	Muscovy Duck
Green Parakeet	Shining Cowbird
Oriental Pratincole	*Cuban Emerald
Brown Flycatcher	*Cape Petrel
Siberian Blue Robin	*Slender-billed Curlew
Mugimaki Flycatcher	*Stejneger's Petrel

*Delete from Checklist?

Appendix

Letter of Dr. John W. Fitzpatrick to Chairman of the Checklist Committee, concerning the *Elaenia* situation:

Field Museum of Natural History
Chicago, IL 60605

Dr. Frank B. Gill
Chairman, ABA Checklist Committee
Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia
19th and The Parkway
Philadelphia, PA 19103

Dear Frank,

Finally, I've gotten to the *Elaenia* problem. Sorry about the delay.

This is another borderline situation, which will be standard for small tropical flycatchers unless an actual specimen is taken. To summarize my opinion, elaborated below, this bird was unequivocally an *Elaenia*, and it was 99% surely *E. martinica*. Unexpectedly, my only remaining doubt rests upon the song of *E. albiceps*, which I've never heard. My reasoning follows:

1. ***Elaenia*.** The photograph positively confirms the small-headed, short-billed, medium-crested look of a standard *Elaenia*. Both the photo and the numerous observers' records indicate an extensive semi-concealed white coronal patch, typical of numerous *Elaenia* species and virtually unknown in the rest of the family (coronal patches of other colors are common, of course). I have absolutely no doubts whatsoever that the bird belonged to the genus *Elaenia*.

2. **White Coronal Patch.** Only about half the species in the genus have a crown-patch that is sufficiently well-developed to fit the descriptions and photo. A few additional spp. have small, ill-defined crown-patches, and these I eliminated (actually, in each case other fieldmarks corroborate their elimination). The following species show sufficient white in the crown to be considered further:

<i>Elaenia martinica</i>	<i>chiriquensis</i>
<i>flavogaster</i>	<i>pallatangae</i>
<i>albiceps</i>	<i>fallax</i>
<i>parvirostris</i>	
<i>gigas</i>	

3. **Lack of Conspicuous Yellow on Underparts.** This character cannot be confirmed by the photo because of the blurry yellowish leaf obscuring the ventral side of the bird. However, various observers noted either “no yellow” or (more accurately for virtually all flycatchers)

“very slight yellowish tinge”. This character definitively eliminates *flavogaster* (also has conspicuous eye-ring, very bushy crest, and distinctively harsh, burry voice), *gigas* (also huge, with peculiar “double” crest, or “horns”, surrounding a massive coronal patch, and with distinctive song: *perCHEEER!*), *chiriquensis* (also shows BOLD white wing-bars, a noticeable—though narrow—eye-ring, usually not much white in crown, and has a simple one- or two-syllable voice), *pallatangae* (conspicuously yellow-green all over, with eye-ring and bold whitish to yellowish wing-bars on black coverts). This leaves only *martinica*, *albiceps*, *parvirostris*, and *fallax* to consider.

4. **Size.** Field comparisons indicated the bird to be noticeably larger than *Vireo olivaceus*. This is important, because it eliminates *Elaenia fallax*, the other West Indian *Elaenia*, which would have looked about the same size as or even a bit less robust than the vireo. (*E. fallax* also is quite yellow below, and most probably would not be referred to as lacking yellow on the underparts. Its song, which I have heard, is a short, rather nondescript note with an abrupt ending.) Also eliminated is *E. parvirostris*, which also is about the size of *Vireo olivaceus*. (It also has a pearly-gray breast and very green upperparts that would have been described as more grass-green than “brownish-grayish olive”; I do not know its song; it is a very delicate *Elaenia*, and quite distinctive within this uniform group.)

5. ***E. martinica* versus *E. albiceps*?** I tend toward the conservative on such issues (see my comments on the *Myiopagis* record, which included hand-held photos), but I still am confident that the Pensacola *Elaenia* was one of only two species, *martinica* or *albiceps*. The photograph cannot separate these two, nor can the descriptions. These species are very similar, and *E. albiceps* is highly migratory within South America (mainly the Andes). Unfortunately, I do not know the song of *albiceps*; it seems to remain pretty quiet or with a simple, single-syllable note where I have seen it in migration. Both species share *indistinct* wing-bars, whitish underparts, and the crest with much white in it. Many populations of *albiceps* have conspicuous eye-rings, but unfortunately some populations and some individuals do not.

Concluding remarks: I have heard *E. martinica* on several islands in the Lesser Antilles. While not identical in detail to their notes, my own notes indicate a distinctive, warbling, three-part song remarkably similar to the one described by

Barbig. Furthermore, I was impressed by the peculiar behavior of *martinica*: compared to most other *Elaenias* it seems much more to spend its time *within* the foliage rather than above it or apart from it. The analogy had not come to my mind before reading the material you sent, but in this sense my experience with *martinica* indeed likens it to vireo behavior rather than to more typical *Elaenia* behavior, an observation made by several observers of the Pensacola bird. I must add, however that *albiceps* also is less prone to using conspicuous perches than are many other *Elaenias*!

Given the geographic picture (*martinica* is spreading and is close by, and *albiceps* has never been recorded outside of South America), the behavioral evidence (complex, warbling songs are unusual in *Elaenia*), and the fact that nothing seems wrong for *martinica*, I am quite positive about this bird's being a Caribbean *Elaenia*—but only 99% positive. Because the photograph itself cannot conclusively confirm the identity of the species, the AOU Committee on Classification and Nomenclature presumably cannot assign an AOU number to this species on the basis of the one photograph. I shall send them copies of all this material and my letter, and we will discuss the matter again.

Allow me to conclude by once again voicing my humble hope that birders and ornithologists join forces on such records, occasionally sacrificing specimens in the interest of continued advancement of our knowledge of sources and causes of tropical vagrants to North American soil! I hope that these comments have been useful.

Best regards,

(signed) John W. Fitzpatrick

ABA Checklist Committee Prior to May 1, 1985:

Frank B. Gill, Chairman	Chandler S. Robbins
Lawrence G. Balch	Arnold Small
D.D. Gibson	Paul W. Sykes, Jr.
Kenn Kaufman	James A. Tucker
G. Stuart Keith	Peter D. Vickery
Guy McCaskie	

After May 1, 1985:

Frank B. Gill, Chairman	J.V. Remsen
Lawrence G. Balch	James A. Tucker
Laurence C. Binford	Alan Wornington
D.D. Gibson	
Kenn Kaufman	

