

4114 Fessenden St., N.W.
Washington 16, D.C.
March 25, 1956

Miss Olivia McCabe
3322 Fifth Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa

Dear Miss McCabe:

I enjoyed having your letter of March 15th with its many questions. Some of them are more difficult to answer than others.

You seem to have the right answer to the first one as to the water requirements of nestlings. At least some of the answer is contained in Glover M. Allen's "Birds and Their Attributes" published by the Marshall Jones Company in 1925. On page 124 he reviews methods of drinking, the manner in which doves and pigeons find water, and the way birds in winter may secure moisture from the snow. I saw the nesting albatrosses sit with open beak snapping at the rain drops. They remain on the nest without food and water for as much as 14 to 18 days. Most of the fellows around the office agreed that the soft worms and insects fed to nestlings probably supplied all the moisture they need.

I can't get very excited about field identification of subspecies of robins or any other species where the characteristics can be found only as an average factor and generally only at the extreme limits of its range. All of the birds in a broad belt between the eastern and western robins are bound to be intermediate. This same situation prevails between the red-shafted and yellow-shafted flickers which are full species. A paper given at the A.O.U. meeting in Boston showed that about 90 per cent of the flickers found through central Nebraska are hybrids.

I think that you know all common subspecies names will be omitted from the next A.O.U. Check-List. Only the scientific names will be included. So we will have robin, song sparrow, etc. I am very much in favor of this since the field identification of subspecies is generally not satisfactory unless the specimen is collected for proof.

While I have never seen a white-winged junco in life I have always felt it could be recognized. It is a full species and occurs in the Rocky Mountains and the Black Hills. We never had it during the 3 years we were in South Dakota. The white bars cross the wing. I have seen birds with white feathers, but that is not too unusual. The bird has occurred casually in Oklahoma, Kansas, and New Mexico. Sight records in the New England states were considered to be birds with some albinistic feathers.

I am afraid I can't give you any help on black rails since it is another species I have never seen in life. Some day I expect to watch one long enough to be well satisfied. Our son Paul has made several trips to Elliott's Island, on the Maryland Eastern Shore, where they heard "several" birds calling just before day-break, and kicked up one or two by wading through the marsh. These birds have most often been found by persons using dogs. Otherwise they seem to run on the marsh floor rather than fly. I would expect that some records of this small rail will turn up from time to time since Iowa is within its normal range.

The American scoter (which will be called "Common" rather than "Black", unfortunately) seems to me to be quite different than the black rail. By this I mean some species are rare because they are secretive, while others are rare because they are a long ways out of their normal range. While it is true that these scoters nest across the top of Arctic Canada they move to both coasts to winter with a few records on the Great Lakes. The answer to this is simple if you look at its food requirements. They feed on mussels, sea-clams, and scallops which they dive for in as much as 40 feet of water. We find these birds on the Coast, in deep water, in mixed flocks with other scoters but not mixed with other diving ducks. They seldom come down until November. The female looks a little bit like a black duck around the head but the bill is quite different and they can be identified as a scoter easily at half a mile without a spotting scope by their dark color, down-sloping tail (quite different than a puddle-duck), and the fact that they are under water two-thirds of the time. Some coots are rather dull but all jerk their necks as they swim. They don't stay under water very long. Never-the-less, I have seen some coots I had to look at a good long time. There have been some records of scoters in the deep-lake region of northwestern Iowa. But in general they seem to miss the entire Mississippi River Valley except on rare occasions.

I think we miss many stragglers, well marked birds that drift eastward with prevailing winds. They get many in the New England area. They have photos to prove many of these such as the green-tailed towhee, black-headed grosbeak, wood ibis, glossy ibis, and a couple of records of the Bullock's oriole. Hope this will help you settle your various questions,

Sincerely,