

REPORT OF THE JOINT AOU-COS MERGER WORKING GROUP

2 May 2016

American Ornithologists' Union members: Steven Beissinger (President-Elect), Scott Lanyon (President), and Melinda Pruett-Jones (Executive Director)

Cooper Ornithological Society members: Thomas Martin (former President), Martin Raphael (President), Kimberly Sullivan (former President), Blair Wolf (Board of Directors)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The purpose of this report is to inform the leadership and membership of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) and the Cooper Ornithological Society (COS) of the progress resulting from discussions of merging the two societies. COS made a motion, which was passed unanimously by the leadership of both societies, to investigate merging during a joint meeting of the AOU Council and the COS Board in July 2016 at the annual meeting of the two societies in Oklahoma. The motion was motivated by the recognition that AOU and COS were already doing most of our mission-critical activities jointly (publications, meetings, website, and key conservation activities), and the perception that COS had been drawing more from its endowment than was desirable for long-term financial stability. A joint AOU-COS Merger Working Group was appointed at the Oklahoma meeting to move the merger discussion forward.

This report discusses the Merger Working Group findings. It presents the potential advantages and disadvantages of merging, hurdles to merger and their resolution, and feedback about them from membership and leadership.

Challenges to merging revolve around organizational structure, finance, mission, membership, publications, meetings, and partnerships. The Merger Working Group was able to reach consensus relatively easily on most issues as summarized in Table 1. Merging would not result in new uncommitted resources to invest in new programs; there would be minor cost savings and a decrease in income from dues because 92% of COS members are members of the AOU. Nevertheless, the combined assets and liabilities should allow the merged society to continue to offer the same services to a largely unchanged membership base with a level of financial stability. Ten changes to the AOU bylaws were suggested for consideration by COS leadership related to: (a) straight-forward "housekeeping" updates to add COS publication names; (b) differences in "governance processes" between COS and AOU, which affect AOU Council votes and elections, that are currently being examined by the AOU Bylaws Committee; and (c) recognition of COS Honorary Fellows.

Responses from AOU and COS members to the question of whether the two societies should merge were overwhelming positive (~4:1), with 81% in favor of merging.

The name of the merged organization is perhaps the most significant remaining hurdle. The Merger Working Group discussed and rejected the idea that a new name for the merged organization was necessary solely to avoid the perception that one of our current organizations wins and the other organization loses. Instead, the Working Group agreed that each society

should evaluate an exhaustive list of alternatives, including both existing names of our societies, to determine which name would be best for ornithology. COS Board of Directors voted to endorse “American Ornithological Society” because it is a straight-forward name and represents consolidation of the two organizations to become a new organization. AOU Council believes the AOU name and its brand are valuable, and are hesitant to give up this identity which carries national and international recognition. The indispensable part of the brand may be “AOU” rather than “American Ornithologists’ Union”. There are no objective data to determine the value of the AOU brand, which would require funding and conducting a formal brand audit.

Limited feedback on a name change was received by AOU and COS membership. It indicated a range of opinions, but also illustrated the value and need to engage AOU and COS membership in the name conversation.

If the two societies don’t merge, the current AOU-COS partnership will likely be changing. The AOU is rapidly undergoing professionalization, with new models for meeting and membership management, a strategic plan in process, and a capital campaign that will launch later this year.

Motivation for a Merger and Approach to Discussions

The AOU Council and the COS Board met together in July 2015 at our annual meeting in Norman, Oklahoma to review the progress and success of our partnerships: the joint publication of our journals, our joint meetings, our joint communications and website (www.americanornithology.org), and our joint Science Arbitration initiative. During this meeting, Tom Martin of the COS Board posed the question, “shouldn’t we merge?” Members of the governing boards of COS and AOU discussed this proposal at great length and with great enthusiasm.

Motivations for merger were varied but included the recognition that 92% of COS members were AOU members, that AOU and COS were already doing most of our mission-critical activities jointly (publications, meetings, website, and key conservation activities), and the perception that COS had been drawing more from its endowment than was desirable for long-term financial stability. Moreover, the number of members of both societies has been declining, as have institutional subscriptions to their journals (see Appendix I Fig. 1). COS now has about 1300+ members and AOU 2700+ members. Institutional subscriptions to both journals have also been declining over the past 15 years from ~750 to ~200 for *The Condor* and ~900 to ~240 for *The Auk* (Appendix I Fig. 1).

The AOU Council and COS Board jointly and unanimously approved the proposal to move forward in pursuit of a merger. In Oklahoma, there were numerous meetings between AOU Leadership (Steven Beissinger, Scott Lanyon and Melinda Pruett-Jones) and COS Leadership (Frank Moore and Martin Raphael) at which the parameters of the discussion and timeline were discussed.

AOU and COS agreed on the goal of reaching a decision regarding a merger by January 2016. This development was announced and discussed at the AOU Fellows meeting and the COS business meeting in Oklahoma. Initial progress would be made by a jointly appointed AOU-COS Merger Working Group (hereafter “Merger Working Group”).

A series of Merger Working Group discussions from September 2015 through January 2016 were conducted via conference calls between members of the merger working group, with the input of Rick Lesaar, a consultant of the company Crabtree+Crabtree.

Early in the discussions it was agreed that, if a merger occurred, AOU as the larger society would be the “receiving organization” and COS would be the “dissolving organization” to facilitate legal requirements and procedures.

Potential Advantages and Disadvantages of Merging

The Merger Working Group discussions began by determining potential advantages and disadvantages of merging, and evaluating whether they presented hurdles. Potential advantages for merging for both organizations were transmitted to memberships of AOU and COS in October 2015:

1. **Lower Dues for Individuals.** Members of both organizations would pay one membership fee, not two, to the merged organization. (This is further evaluated below in the section entitled **Financial Implications of a Merger**).
2. **Increased resources to support members at all stages of their careers.** By combining programs and leadership efforts, a single organization would be in a better position to offer quality mentoring and development activities for students, early career professionals, teachers, mid-career professionals and retirees at annual meetings, more research and travel grants, recognition awards, editorial support for Latin American authors and online resources for teaching, research and outreach. All members would have access to *The Auk: Ornithological Advances*, *The Condor: Ornithological Applications* and *The Birds of North America*. In a merged organization, fewer resources would be applied to administrative and operating expenses by combining functions, leaving more resources to be applied to ornithology (Note that finances of a merged organization are evaluated below in the section entitled **Financial Implications of Merging and of Not Merging**).
3. **Greater agility in publishing.** A primary function of our societies is to produce journals that provide high quality science to aid authors, scientists, agencies, and the public. Journal publishing is changing rapidly and evolution of the digital platforms, rapid online availability, open access, archive access, print-on-demand, etc. are needed to continue to enhance the visibility, impact, and usability of our journals. These possibilities will be strongly facilitated by the increased resources of a merged society. In a merged organization, strategic decisions would be more streamlined than the current situation with two societies.
4. **Increased likelihood of success in fundraising.** The act of merging the two societies would be a significant statement to potential funders of our commitment to and vision for the future of ornithology.

Discussions also identified disadvantages or issues that would emerge from merging AOU and COS. They mainly revolved around the values and challenges of having multiple ornithological societies, and the effects of the loss of a smaller society with a regional (western US) mission. For example, would there be a reduction of meeting locations in the less populated portions of the US? Would there be a reduction in ornithological leadership positions for young scientists to

attain? Would there be a narrowing of editorial philosophy that scientists will face when attempting to publish their works? What would happen to the privileges of the Life Members of each society?

These and other concerns were collated by the Merger Working Group into an extensive list of issues that revolved around organizational structure, finance, mission, membership, publications, meetings and partnerships. Most of these issues were straight-forward to address and are summarized with their proposed resolution below in Table 1.

Table 1. Potential merger issues relating to organizational structure, finance, mission, membership, publications, meetings and partnerships.

Category	Issue	Proposed Resolution
Organizational Merger	How will the merger happen functionally?	We propose that COS would merge into AOU, and the new combined organization would have revised bylaws and if desirable a new name.
Mission	As an organization, AOU is interested in the global avifauna and ornithologists primarily of the Western Hemisphere. Would a merger of COS with AOU result in a loss of focus on the avifauna of North America?	We propose that the merged organization have as its focus the global avifauna and ornithologists primarily of the Western Hemisphere.
Organizational Structure	Following merger, how should AOU Bylaws change?	To be determined as discussed below in the section Potential Changes to AOU Bylaws .
Organizational Structure	Following merger, will Elective member and Fellow categories of AOU continue and would Honorary members of COS continue?	We believe that all of these membership categories have the potential to be very important in professional development, but this potential is realized only if they are well implemented (i.e., deserving ornithologists are recognized). Implementing these categories effectively and strategically must be a priority and will require the development of a well-functioning member database.

Organizational Structure	Following merger, will there be limitations on who can be elected as an officer or as member of the governing body?	To be determined as discussed below in the section Potential Changes to AOU Bylaws.
Organizational Structure	Following merger, who will vote on bylaws changes and other decisions?	To be determined as discussed below in the section Potential Changes to AOU Bylaws.
Organizational Structure	Will there be fewer total leadership positions?	There will probably be fewer individuals elected to leadership positions, but leadership opportunities are by no means restricted to elected positions as we anticipate extensive committee membership and work.
Organizational Structure	What will be the name of the merged organization?	To be determined as discussed below in the section On the Name of the Merged Organization.
Finance	What does the first year post-merger budget look like?	This is discussed below in the section Financial Implications of Merging and of Not Merging.
Finance	Will budgets for existing programs have to be cut or the annual endowment draw of either organization increased as a result of a merger?	This is discussed below in the section Financial Implications of Merging and of Not Merging.
Finance	Following merger, how will we manage the transfer of assets including fate of invested funds?	Transfer of assets will be done under the guidance of legal counsel
History	Following merger, how do we retain identities, history, and traditions?	We propose that existing awards be retained, but renamed by adding the name of the originating organization. We also suggest setting up portions of the web site to celebrate the history of the organizations and maintain organizational archives.

Membership	Following merger, what happens to people with lifetime memberships (COS, AOU, or both)?	We propose that all continue to be lifetime members of the organization going forward.
Membership	Following merger, will all members have online access to BNA?	We propose that all members of the merged organization will have access to BNA.
Membership	Following merger, what will the new annual dues be?	To be determined but this is discussed in the section Financial Implications of Merging and of Not Merging.
Committees	Following merger, what happens to AOU and COS committees?	We will need to re-examine the matrix of committees and their charges. We propose that where we have duplicate committees, we merge them. All other committees will be retained in the merged organization, at least to start.
Communications	Following merger, what happens to the AO.org website?	We propose simplifying the website structure (removal of the dual organization format). Further, we propose that we use the web site to explicitly, and very visibly, acknowledge the two society's histories.
Publications	What changes will happen to COPO, the joint publications office of AOU and COS?	Few changes to its operations are anticipated. Following merger, COPO's programmatic income and expenses will be managed as part of the merged organization (much more efficient and logical than the current situation).
Publications	What happens to <i>The Auk</i> ?	No change
Publications	What happens to <i>The Condor</i> ?	No change
Publications	What happens to <i>Studies in Avian Biology</i> ?	No change
Meetings	Historically, COS held small annual meetings in the west. Will a COS merger with AOU reduce the opportunity for west coast ornithologists to participate in meetings?	We anticipate that the merged organization would continue to have an annual meeting similar to the joint meetings that AOU and COS have had for a decade. Locations would vary, and selected based on desirability of destination and value-for-dollar, with rotating geographic representation across the region the organization represents.

Partnerships	Following merger, what will be the relationship of the organization with OSNA?	OSNA societies are currently evaluating a new association management system. The OSNA partnership is intended to continue, but likely in a new cooperative arrangement.
Partnerships	Following merger, what will be the relationship of the organization with Ornithological Council?	To be determined

AOU Council affirmed many of these positions at its mid-year meeting in March 2016. Council believes merger is logical and would result in increased efficiency given that AOU is already doing many things in partnership with COS. There was also consensus that preserving COS traditions in a merged organization is a high priority. Finally, Council confirmed that preserving *The Condor* is of great importance so that opportunities for ornithologists to publish are not reduced.

Feedback on Merger from the AOU and COS Membership in Fall 2015

The Merger Working Group then canvassed AOU and COS membership about their opinions of a proposed merger in October 2015. The communication sent by email included a discussion of the four potential advantages for merging for both organizations, and the concerns raised and Table 1 as discussed in the previous section. We asked members if we were addressing their concerns in the issues and resolutions identified above, and what excited them and what concerned them about the prospect of a merger. We also asked members to identify the great things about each society that they would want to preserve in a merged organization.

Responses by members to the question of whether the two societies should merge were overwhelming positive (~4:1). Of the 43 written responses received, 81% were in favor of merging and 19% were against merging.

Representative comments received in favor of merging indicate varied perspectives and included:

“I’ve never fully appreciated the differences between the two organizations: at the joint meetings there is no distinction for most attendees. The former differences between the Auk and Condor seemed slight to me and their roles are more clear as complementary publications.”

“I am a current member of both AOU and COS at the student level (I’m working toward my master’s degree). The reason I am a member of both is that I

misunderstood the purpose of each group as the field of ornithology has so many separate organizations with slightly different mission statements. For this reason, I fully support a merger...

“Of course I am all in favor of it, I think it's the only way to gain traction for the next generation.”

“I am excited by the new organization being the organization of the Western Hemisphere. From my perspective as a “northerner”, I think that over time this will make a big difference in how north relates to south.”

“While I think it is important to preserve the history of each (society), I am most excited about having one membership instead of two.”

“The merged new society/organization would be clearly recognized as THE scientific ornithological society in the US. The organization could speak with one voice about important issues (e.g. taxonomy, scientific disputes, conservation issues, etc.) and could serve as clear contact for questions from outside the ornithological community. It may also facilitate gaining new members.”

‘As a ‘sleeper’ member of both, this sounds good and fiscally more sustainable in the current ice age of support for science.’

“There is no reason why regional meetings can't happen just as or more often after the merger. Other professional organizations do it, there's no reason we can't do more of it.”

“I welcome and endorse the proposal of an AOU/COS merger. A federated and strengthen professional scientific organization will be better positioned to address the challenges of the future.”

“Much as some people may feel a twinge of nostalgia for the era of multiple ‘boutique’ organizations, the reality is that we’re in an era of fewer, larger, more professional ones. I think the merger proposal is a sensible response to these changes.”

Concerns raised by AOU and COS members were primarily about the financial implications of merger, both for the remaining organization and for individual members. Would total dues income decrease? Would an individual pay higher annual dues than (s)he currently pays for the AOU? Would the total number of members drop? Finally, one group of former COS officers recommended that COS be re-configured as an ornithological society focused on conservation of the western North American avifauna.

Representative concerns expressed by members about merging the two societies included:

“I feel that the sense of community is better in a smaller society.”

“I am concerned about ...reduction of meeting locations in the less populated portions of the US and in ornithological leadership positions for young scientists to attain.”

“Because AOU is the larger and more 'dominant' society, I am concerned that COS will be subsumed and that rather than being a fairly merged society, the COS will simply be swallowed up by the AOU.”

“I do understand the strength that comes from one big platform for scholarship and outreach, but I’m not sure that the benefit of one big voice outweighs the benefit of two smaller, often aligned voices that maintain some independence from each other.”

Financial Implications of Merging and of Not Merging

Here we examine the separate financial projections for each society and one scenario for projecting a three-year budget of a single merged society (Table 2). These projections are useful to judge the financial impact of merging or of not merging on each society. They were developed by Rebecca Kimball (AOU Treasurer), Barb Kus (COS Treasurer), and Melinda Pruett-Jones (AOU Executive Director).

To provide a reasonable comparison of financial projections among AOU, COS, and the merged society, the budgets were developed within the following framework: (1) the baseline budget projections 2017 to 2019 were designed to achieve or approach a balance of revenues and expenses, (2) revenues were held constant for all three society budgets in the analysis, including member revenues, contribution revenues, publication revenues, and transfers to endowment; and (3) increases or decreases in annual expenses were held constant across all three budgets. These projections are intended to objectively illustrate the financial outcomes of merger. They were developed solely for this exercise; other assumptions and conditions may apply to independent projections made by the societies in the future. All budgets include a 4.5% draw on endowment, a level considered to be prudent financial management for endowment spending and preservation.

AOU and COS are able to achieve a balanced budget at a 4.5% draw on their endowments (Table 2). AOU chose to take a larger draw from its reserves in an effort to professionalize and invest strategically in program development and expansion from 2013 to present. During the same time

period, COS chose to draw more from its invested funds to cover the costs of publications, awards, and other programs. Publishing *The Auk* and *The Condor* through COPO is the largest single expense in the budget of both societies.

Table 2. COS and AOU budget projection without merger and a 4.5% endowment draw and for a single, merged ornithological society.

Society	Budget Projections	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
AOU	Revenues	\$696,500	\$877,800	\$828,785	\$868,400	\$890,400
	Expenses	\$774,000	\$863,345	\$872,910	\$887,444	\$863,345
	Surplus/(Deficit)	(\$77,500)	(\$28,090)	(\$34,560)	(\$4,510)	\$2,956
COS	Revenues	\$321,584	\$375,200	\$318,200	\$304,700	\$306,200
	Expenses	\$351,745	\$372,315	\$368,280	\$359,745	\$363,960
	Surplus/(Deficit)	(\$30,000)	\$2,855	(\$50,080)	(\$55,045)	(\$57,760)
Merged	Revenues	-	-	\$1,167,000	\$1,193,000	\$1,218,000
	Expenses	-	-	\$1,187,000	\$1,197,000	\$1,214,000
	Surplus/(Deficit)	-	-	(\$20,000)	(\$4,000)	\$4,000

A merger would combine not only assets but also the commitments and obligations of the two organizations. The merger by itself would not result in new uncommitted resources to invest in new programs. *Nevertheless, the combined assets and liabilities of both organizations will allow the merged society to continue to offer the same services to a largely unchanged membership base at a level of financial stability (Table 2).*

Overall, a merger will have relatively few cost savings for the two societies, as many expenses are already shared between the two societies (e.g., website, publications, meetings) or will likely be maintained at similar levels after a merger (e.g., funds for awards, Ornithological Council payments, etc.). There will be some projected savings in administrative and financial expenses, and possibly in OSNA membership management fees.

The major loss of revenue will be through membership dues. Currently, about 92% of the members of COS are also members of AOU, and thus will only pay one set of dues rather than two. To be conservative, we made the assumption that the approximately 200 COS members that are not members of AOU will not join the new society. If the new society membership rates

equal those of the AOU (which are higher than COS), there could be a maximum reduction in total dues revenues of up to \$55,000. One-time expenses for merger are projected in 2016 to cover legal counsel, asset transfers, creative services, website revision, and other programmatic changes (\$22,500 for AOU and \$11,000 for COS).

While there will likely be slightly more loss of revenue than savings from a merger (Table 2), this deficit could be offset by modest increases in dues (\$2 to \$10 per person, depending on category) above current AOU membership rates, making the merger cost-neutral in the first year following merger.

One major, and increasing expense, is COPO. While the merger will not affect COPO expenses, AOU and COS will be taking a more comprehensive look at the COPO budget to ensure it is running as efficiently as possible.

The following considerations and assumptions were made in estimating the budget after merger of the single ornithological society for years 2017-2019:

1. A 4.5% investment draw (AOU's standard practice) of the estimated 5-year running average of the combined endowments over all 3 years.
2. Loss of membership revenue due to the ~92% of COS members who are AOU members, a conservative estimate of no annual growth or loss in membership, and a slight increase in dues (\$10 for regular members, \$2-\$5 increases in other categories).
3. Conservative growth in contributions received; significant contributions will be restricted to endowment rather than unrestricted gifts that can offset general operating costs.
4. \$20,000 in annual meeting surplus produced each year due to the new meeting model.
5. COPO is projected to operate at a loss through 2019.
6. Limited cost savings by combining administrative functions. With an estimated 5% increase in administrative costs per year (admin, financial & legal services), this is a short-term savings.
7. No new positions for the merged society; projecting a 5% increase in total compensation (salary, benefits) per year.
8. No significant growth in any program expenses after merger (communications, grants, awards, membership management, committees, etc.).

Potential Changes to AOU Bylaws

Conference call discussions between AOU and COS leadership identified a number of governance processes that differed between the two organizations. Some may result from

historical processes (i.e., organizational “phylogenetic inertia”), while others may represent differences in governance styles. COS leadership was asked to identify differences in the bylaws of the two organizations. They identified 10 changes to the AOU bylaws for consideration.

1. Article I Section 2 (Membership Classes): COS suggested that there would be a need to recognize COS Honorary Members here, or in some other appropriate spot in the bylaws.
2. Article II Section 1 (Officers and Council composition): In the COS, former Presidents are not part of the Council, so COS leadership suggested deleting “and the Ex Presidents” to exclude them from Council.
3. Article II section 5 (filling vacancies in Officers and Council): COS suggested deleting “or by the Executive Committee” because only board members vote in COS, unlike AOU that allows officers to cast votes.
4. Article II section 6 (designates who is eligible to hold office and elect Fellows): In the COS, any member can be elected to an office. In the AOU, only Fellows are eligible to be elected President and President-Elect, and only Fellows and Elective Members can be Councilors. COS suggested deleting this bylaw except for retaining how Fellows elect new Fellows.
5. Article III Section 6 (Meetings): COS suggested adding a statement that Council meetings are open to all members except when discussing personnel or legal matters.
6. Article IV Section 2 (Elections): AOU bylaws require nominations for office to come from Fellows and Elective Members. In COS, nominations are open to the entire membership so COS leadership suggested the bylaws be changed to allow any member to nominate persons for office.
7. Article IV Section 6 (Appointment of Editors): Bylaws would need to add the Editors of *The Condor* and *Studies in Avian Biology* to those being elected annually by AOU Council, which already includes the editors of *The Auk* and *Ornithological Monographs*.
8. Article V Section 3 (Publications): Add “*The Condor*” to the list of serial publications produced by AOU, which already includes *The Auk*.
9. Article VII Section 1 (Scientific communications and publications): COS suggested adding “*The Condor* and a book series called *Studies in Avian Biology*” to the serial journals of ornithology (which already includes *The Auk*) and other publications of the society.

10. Article IX (Bylaw changes): AOU currently requires bylaw changes to be approved by a majority vote of the Fellows. COS suggested bylaws changes should be approved by a supermajority (2/3rds) vote of the Council and Officers instead of the Fellows.

The 10 suggested changes to the AOU bylaws above can be grouped into 3 categories: (a) straight-forward “housekeeping” updates relating to publication names that would be required if the organizations merged (#’s 7, 8 and 9); (b) “governance processes” affecting AOU Council and elections that are being examined by the AOU Bylaws Committee and will be discussed by Council to determine the merit they offer for the AOU (#’s 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6); and (c) recognition of COS Honorary Fellows (currently ~35 living members).

Responding to this list of possible bylaws changes, AOU President Scott Lanyon asked the AOU Bylaws Committee to lead deliberations to determine if a proposed by-law change is in the best interests of the AOU, evaluate the suggested changes in relation to “best practices” of professional organizations, and report back to AOU Council. The committee is composed of three members, Francie Cuthbert (chair), Dan Christol and Sarah Morris, at least two of which are long-time or life members of both societies.

Finally, if AOU were to change the name of the organization as part of the merger, this would require changes throughout the bylaws. This is discussed below in the next section.

On the Name of the Merged Organization

The name of the merged organization was an issue that rose to prominence early in the merger discussions at the Oklahoma meeting in July 2015. The AOU Council indicated that, since the AOU was the receiving organization, it was open to the idea of a new name for the merged society if it was demonstrably better for ornithology than was American Ornithologists’ Union and its brand, AOU. Some COS leaders stated that a new name for the merged society was a precondition of merger in order to avoid the perception that the AOU would be simply absorbing the COS.

The Merger Working Group discussed and rejected the idea that a new name for the merged organization was necessary solely to avoid the perception that one organization wins and the other organization loses. Instead, the Working Group agreed to objectively evaluate all alternatives, including both existing names of our societies, to determine which name would be best for ornithology and ornithologists.

Based on member responses and discussions of the Merger Working Group, an inclusive list of suggested names was developed:

- a. American Ornithological Society
- b. American Ornithological Union
- c. American Ornithologists' Union
- d. American Ornithologists Union
- e. American Ornithologists' Union - Cooper Ornithological Society
- f. Cooper Ornithological Society
- g. Ornithological Society of America
- h. Ornithological Society of the Americas
- i. Ornithologists' Union of the Americas
- j. Society for Ornithology
- k. Society of American Ornithology
- l. Union of Western Hemisphere Ornithologists

The Merger Working Group was unable to come to consensus recommendation on one of these names and decided that it was an opportune moment to engage their respective leaderships in a broader discussion of the name issue.

The COS Board discussed potential names in March 2016 and voted to endorse “American Ornithological Society” as their choice. COS thought that it was better than “American Ornithologists’ Union” because it is a more straight-forward name and because a new name would indicate that the two organizations had merged. The two societies have already created a joint website entitled “American Ornithology.” Some COS Board members felt that the merger should be viewed as an opportunity to think about the future and that retaining one of the societal names is a lost opportunity.

AOU Council’s discussed the advantages and disadvantages of renaming the AOU at its mid-year meeting in March 2016. AOU Council believes the AOU name and its brand are valuable, and are hesitant to give up this identity which carries national and international recognition. The indispensable part of the brand may be “AOU” rather than “American Ornithologists’ Union”. Many members of AOU Council felt that retaining the AOU brand is sufficiently important that other ways should be undertaken to avoid the perception of winners vs. losers in a merger, such as designing a new logo for the merged society as recognition that the organization has changed.

There are no objective data to determine the value of the AOU brand. AOU leadership supported the idea that funding a formal brand audit would be the best way to obtain objective information about its value, which would cost about \$10,000. A brand audit would quantify the degree of support and concerns of AOU and COS members around the choice of name, and determine the impact of changing the name of the AOU. However, the COS Board was unwilling to help fund an audit, so one was not pursued.

AOU Council expressed in their March meeting that, while a name change is not out of the question, it would need to serve a strategic purpose. In response, COS leadership provided these five points of justification for why it would be advantageous to change the name from AOU to American Ornithological Society (AOS):

1. **Perception:** It is to the ornithological community's advantage that the merger is perceived to be a building something new rather than the larger society consolidating a smaller society.
2. **The future:** A name change sends the signal that something new is being created. The new name is forward-looking and forward-thinking, while still holding on to our rich traditions and history.
3. **Welcoming others:** A long-term possibility (although not necessarily a goal) is that other societies may consider merging in the future. This is less likely to happen if there is a perception of consolidation through dissolution of one society rather than the merging of the two societies.
4. **Rebranding:** Re-branding has already started with the creation of the "American Ornithology" website.
5. **Finding middle ground:** COS would lose its historical recognition if it merged into AOS because the defining aspect of its brand is "Cooper". For AOU, the change to AOS is less severe.

Multiple AOU and COS members commented about the name of the merged organization when asked in October 2015 for feedback about the possibility of a merger. Their thoughts below are indicative of the range of opinions, and open a window on the need to engage AOU and COS membership in the name conversation.

"The reasons for the merger seem sound to me. However, change in a world that is currently a whirlwind of change thoroughly unnerves people, particularly those of us that are bit long of tooth. In particular, name changes, while in reality of minor significance, typically generate strong emotional responses that increase resistance to proposals that would otherwise sail through rather unopposed."

"In my opinion the new society should retain the name the AOU. I have a great deal of respect for the COS and I served on the COS student board as a graduate student, but the AOU as a brand and organization is irreplaceable."

"I feel merging is what is best for ornithology.....The one thing I would like to see is a new name for the society. I think it may help in the perception that AOU is not over taking COS (even if that might be the case)."

"It would be nice to change it somewhat so that it doesn't appear that the AOU just subsumes the COS. American Ornithological Society?"

“As AOU continues on its strategic path to make a significant difference for ornithology at this important period in history, the name ‘Union’ is the perfect term to convey a united community, unification of priorities, unifying ornithologists across disciplines, etc. The process of merger in this case is unifying.”

“AOU has much broader brand recognition, mainly through the AOU Checklist. Banders, as well as the U.S. and Canadian banding offices, use ‘AOU numbers’ to designate species and forms, and I suspect the name would continue to be used even if AOU changed its name.”

“The only issue that causes me concern is the prospect of a new name, but the reason is not so much what the name would be as it is that action will be taken without any information on what members want. Because we don’t know, we keep pussy-footing around something that may not even be an issue.”

“I fully support a merger and encourage the name of the newly formed group to reflect the broadest possible interpretation of the name (much like AOU now) so that it can be prepared for keeping that new name in possible future mergers with other organizations.”

A New Future for Ornithology in North America, or Plan B?

Initially COS and AOU members have overwhelmingly expressed their desire to see the two societies merge. A merger of the two most influential ornithological societies would probably be well received by the majority of the ornithological community in North America, and it would attract national and international attention. It would send an important message of unity of purpose for professional ornithologists moving forward into the future.

Mergers of any kind are never easy. Of the many impediments to merging that the AOU and COS have identified, the only truly significant hurdle that the Merger Working Group has yet to reconcile is the name of the merged organization. All of the other issues that arose from merging appear readily addressable. A majority of AOU and COS members are likely to be disappointed if the two societies were to walk away from the merger process as a result of not being able to come to agreement about the name of the merged organization.

If the two societies don’t merge, the current AOU-COS partnership is likely to change because the AOU is changing. As a professionalized organization with a staff, AOU is undergoing fundamental and rapid change to operate in a larger arena than it has in the past—all in service of ornithology. AOU is on a trajectory of professionalization over the next three years including the launch a new capital campaign to endow open access for *The Auk*, to increase funding in support

ornithological research, and to launch a society-led conservation initiative. AOU will implement priority actions identified in its long range plan that include procuring a new membership management system, taking full responsibility for logistical and fiscal management of its annual meetings, and developing a society-based website and communications plan.

Thus, in the absence of a merger, the two societies would likely need to revisit their partnership, differentiate some activities, and work more independently. Five past officers of COS have written to the society to urge it to reorganize with a clear focus on conservation of western American or western hemisphere avifaunas.

APPENDIX I

Figure 1. Trends in AOU and COS membership, and institutional journal subscriptions (Auk and Condor).

