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EVALUATING THE MERIT OF SINGLE OBSERVATIONS—RESPONSE TO SCHMUTZ

In reviewing the above editorial “Should single observations be published?”, I initially supported the argument wholeheartedly. My intention here was to prepare a letter expounding the merit of single observations with examples gleaned from the pages of this journal. After reviewing all of the short papers from the Journal’s first to last issue, I had to rethink my position.

One could argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with a publication with the ultimately small sample size, $N = 1$. A problem only arises in the interpretation of that information. At their worst, single observations tell us nothing about the biology of the subject and waste precious journal space. At best, they may suggest new lines of research, challenge conventional wisdom, and provide much needed information on the biology of little-known species. At very least, reports of natural history phenomena usually have the common denominator of being interesting reading. However, the economic reality of publishing a scientific journal such as *The Journal of Raptor Research* dictates that not all interesting observations can be committed to print. Given that, is there a way of separating the wheat from the chaff?

I suggest that potential authors should ask themselves a series of questions that might help them decide whether to report an observation (at least in a scientific journal; there are other avenues for publishing natural history notes). 1) Is the observation incomplete in any way (e.g., species identification, age or sex of the bird, location) that could potentially compromise the interpretation of the phenomenon? In other words, could there be something you either missed or did not know that could change the interpretation of the events? 2) Could the observation be the result of aberrant behavior caused by disease, toxins, human disturbance or captivity? In some cases, of course, the consequences of such factors are of interest; however, in others aberrant behavior may be well known and of little interest. 3) Has the same or similar phenomenon been reported before for the same species in other populations? Although, species x has never been seen to eat species y, it may not warrant publication if prey species a, b and c are known and similar to y. I consider many single accounts of food habits of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*; we know they can eat just about anything), Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) capturing mammals (yet another species caught is of questionable interest), and kleptoparasitism (known to be rather common for a wide range of species) to be redundant and hence unnecessary. 4) Can I get more data or combine data sets? Bird banders, or researchers with long-term projects, might want to delay reporting unusual events such as plumage aberrations, injuries and acts of predation (to name a few popular subjects) until more observations accumulate on the same or related topics. The publication of the collective effort results in a more effective and economical publication.

If you can answer “yes” to any of the above questions, think twice before you submit your paper. Finally, ask yourself “What could someone do with this information?” This is the tough one. If you can’t think of a way that your observation could potentially be of value, then perhaps a non-scientific audience is preferable.—**Gary R. Bortolotti, Department of Biology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada S7N 0W0.**

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HUNTING BEHAVIOR OF AUDUBON’S CRESTED CARACARA

Caracaras are well known scavengers and carrion eaters, and have been observed to kleptoparasitize other raptors, gulls and pelicans (W.C. Glazener 1964, *Condor* 66:162; L. Brown and D. Amadon 1968, Eagles, hawks and falcons of the World, McGraw-Hill, NY), but are also capable of hunting live prey. While foraging they fly close to the ground or perch on high observation posts for long periods of time. Their long legs and extended claws make them well suited for walking and running (J.N. Layne 1985, *Florida Wildl.* 39:40–42).

We observed Crested Caracaras from 7 June to 29 August in 1990, and from 10 June to 3 August in 1991 at the McArthur Agro-ecology Center (MAERC) of the Archbold Biological Station, a 4200-ha cattle ranch. The site consists of improved pastures, Cabbage Palm (*Sabal palmetto*) hammocks, native wetlands and Live Oak (*Quercus virginianus*) uplands. During the above mentioned period, adult caracaras still fed young that had fledged that year. We observed

two pairs that nested at MAERC. One pair had a territory in the northcentral region, and during both seasons was accompanied by three fledglings. A second pair was established to the south and was accompanied by two fledglings in 1990, and three in 1991. Observations were made from within a car, with the help of binoculars, whenever a caracara was observed perched by the roadside.

Of a total of 78 observations, 56 (72%) involved the northern pair and 22 (28%) the southern pair. Observations were biased toward the northern pair because they hunted within the limits of MAERC. The southern pair hunted in the southwest region of the ranch and on adjacent private land. Caracaras were perched on fence posts for 36% of the observations, and on Cabbage Palms for 18%. They were observed in flight 19 times; 6 (7%) in high transit flight and 13 (16%) in low, sweeping flights over open pastures. On 10 (12%) occasions they walked on a pasture and scanned and scratched at the base of grasses. On seven (9%) instances they fed on road-killed Armadillos (*Dasyopus novemcinctus*) and Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), and on one occasion (1%) at the carcass of a domestic cow killed by lightning. While at the carcasses and on the fence posts, they were always with Turkey (*Cathartes aura*) and/or Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*).

While perched on fence posts, adults intently followed the activities of parent songbirds tending nests. Ground nesting birds were a focus, but birds in shrubs or trees were also watched. On two occasions caracaras watched Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*) arriving at the meadowlarks' nest in the pasture and then attempted to stalk them on the ground. After reaching the general vicinity where the meadowlark landed, they examined the base of grasses apparently looking for nests. We observed no successful raid on a meadowlark's nest. However, we did observe three successful raids of nests of tree-nesting Loggerhead Shrikes (*Lanius ludovicianus*) and one on a nest of Northern Mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*). On all four occasions the caracara flew away from the nest tree with one or more nestlings in its beak. Although the mockingbirds followed the caracara, and screamed incessantly, they did not attack it. In contrast, both shrikes chased and attacked the caracara striking it mostly on the nape and back. The caracara twisted and turned in flight but did not release the young shrike.—**Reuven Yosef and Dalit Yosef, Department of Zoology, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, and Archbold Biological Station, P.O. Box 2057, Lake Placid, FL 33852.**

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MIGRANT PEREGRINE FALCONS IN NORTHWESTERN NORTH DAKOTA IN SPRING

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) migration has been described for central Alberta (D. Dekker 1979, *Can. Field-Nat.* 93:296-302 and 1984, *Raptor Res.* 18:92-97). Few other published data exist on peregrines in migration through mid-continent North America, except for scattered reports in *American Birds* and routes implied by J.K. Schmutz et al. (1991, *Wilson Bull.* 103:44-58). Spring data are particularly scarce. Records of timing and areas used by peregrines migrating through this region may be valuable to manage the species in the United States and Canada, where it is currently listed as endangered or threatened (M. Martin 1979, Report to Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, Environment Canada, Ottawa, Canada; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1991, Federal Register 50 17-11).

Incidental to our other field studies during 1985-90, we made from one to several observations during each May ($N = 12$) of Peregrine Falcons at or adjacent to Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge in Burke and Mountrail counties, in northwestern North Dakota. The refuge consists of rolling mixed-grass prairie with 10-50 wetland basins/km². Migratory waterfowl and shorebirds are common to abundant in spring, and many remain to nest there (R.K. Murphy 1990, Vertebrate fauna of Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge, Refuge Publication, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Peregrine Falcons are exclusively migratory in North Dakota, having been extirpated as a breeding species from the state in the 1950s (R.E. Stewart 1975, Breeding Birds of North Dakota, Tri-College Center for Ecological Studies, Fargo, ND).

We observed peregrines during 7-26 May ($\bar{x} = 27$ May, $SD = 4.9$ d), somewhat later than reported by Dekker (1979, 16 April to 30 May, peak 4-7 May for adults and 12-15 May for immatures) for central Alberta. All falcons we observed were in adult plumage. As Dekker (1979) noted, however, immature birds of the *F. p. tundrius* subspecies can be mistaken for Prairie Falcons (*F. mexicanus*) which are fairly common on the refuge in spring. We may have overlooked some immature peregrines. Two peregrines were observed together three times in 1990. We suspect two, and possibly all three, observations were of the same falcons. In all three cases the pair appeared to pursue prey