

OBRC Announcement

Historical Records: A Call for Submissions

by
Bob Curry

The Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) originated in an attempt to validate current sight records. However, all records received, whether accepted or not, are kept on file at the Royal Ontario Museum. As these files have accumulated it has become clear that perhaps the OBRC's most important function is to provide a single repository of all documentations of rare birds within the province. This expanded role is consistent with that experienced by many other such committees in North America and worldwide (Roberson 1990).

Since the beginning, the problem of what to do with "old" records has been a thorny one. However, it becomes increasingly a problem given this expanded role. If all records are to be accumulated, how does the Committee deal with the myriad of mostly valid records for which there is little of the kind of documentation which is expected (and received) to accompany rarity reports today.

Accordingly, at the 1992 fall policy meeting, the OBRC formally approved of a definition of what constitutes a historical record. Although many birders have supported their claims of rarities with written descriptions or other documentation for more than two decades, it was decided that, for our purposes, "historical" would be

defined as any previously published occurrence of a rare bird before the first OBRC Annual Report for 1982 (James 1983). It is abundantly clear that we cannot submit these records to the kind of scrutiny which present-day records must expect. Pre-1982 records with fully acceptable documentation in accordance with today's standards will be treated exactly as are new records. But what of the hundreds of rarities which have appeared in *American Birds* or its predecessor *Audubon Field Notes*, or indeed in numerous other regional and national journals? Most of these records are statements in print that the species was observed, usually with the names of the observers and little else. What we would like from these observers (or anyone who saw the birds) is at least the barest of descriptions of the circumstances and of the birds if possible, based on memory if there is nothing else. Such records (and these would constitute the vast majority of, especially, lesser rarities seen before 1982) would be filed at the ROM, added to the provincial record, summarized in the annual report and given the designation "H", for historical. In this way, it is hoped that over a reasonable time period we may be able to accumulate some documentation on almost all the rare bird occurrences in Ontario.

How should we get started on this? To illustrate with a personal example, this new definition will allow me to submit a short paragraph, based on memory, on the Wilson's Plover which spent several days on Hamilton Beach in May 1961, and which was seen by numerous observers. While there is no way that any report based on distant memory can meet modern requirements, this should suffice to have the record accepted as historical and take its rightful place as a part of the provincial avifaunal record. The Committee urges observers to submit such brief anecdotal accounts of any review list species seen before 1982. More systematically, Committee members, designates or volunteer researchers will be asked to read through back volumes of *American Birds* and *Audubon Field Notes* to compile lists of rarities which have appeared in print, and then ask for such brief reports from the observers, to the extent that they can be contacted.

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This historical records policy is far from perfect. Indeed, there are those who submit that we enter troubled waters and that only records that can withstand the most rigorous scrutiny should be accepted, and that the credibility of any list of records is eroded with such records. However, it is our opinion, and of such bodies as the California Bird Records Committee (Roberson 1990), that the compilation of as complete a database as possible of rare birds in Ontario is a goal which outweighs any such criticism.

Again, we invite all observers to submit notes, however brief, on these old records.

Literature cited

- James, R. D.* 1983. Ontario Bird Records Committee Report for 1982. *Ontario Birds* 1: 7-15.
- Roberson, D.* 1990. North American Bird Records Committees. *Birding* 22: 276-284.

Errata

In the article entitled "Green Violet-ear: First for Canada" (*Ontario Birds* 10: 86-89), note in Table 1 (page 89) that: the July 6 1990 bird from Arkansas was at Lurton, not Furton; and the reference for the October 7 1984 bird at Fort Smith, Arkansas, is *American Birds* 40: 128. Since the latter reference listed the date incorrectly as 1985, a correction is made in *American Birds* 40: 293. Finally, Nick Escott's postal code is P7B 3T9.