

ESCAPES VERSUS VAGRANTS: A COMMENT

by Richard Veit

As co-author of a forthcoming book on the status and distribution of Massachusetts birds, I have been disturbed by an attitude that seems pervasive in ornithological circles and that influences the handling of records of certain species of vagrant birds. In recent regional notes, as well as in periodicals such as American Birds, a number of authors have been plagued by impossible decisions about whether or not some records involve "escapes." More often than not, these authors have chosen a conservative approach and rejected records of species that are frequently kept in captivity. There is no question birds occasionally do escape from captivity and are subsequently reported by birdwatchers. However, summarily dismissing numerous records of a particular species on the sole evidence that the species is common in collections does a disservice to ornithology. In fact, in many instances I find it highly questionable that a given bird seen in the wild is equally or more likely to be an escape than a bona fide vagrant.

How often do wild birds occur far outside their normal ranges? A examination of American Birds, British Birds, or similar periodical reporting bird records will convince the most skeptical of the regularity with which a wide diversity of bird species stray great distances beyond their normal ranges. No ornithologist to my knowledge has questioned the origins of the Aleutian Tern in Great Britain, Sooty Flycatcher or Fairy Tern in Bermuda, Parakeet Auklet in Sweden, Brown-chested Martin or Lucy's Warbler in Massachusetts, or Dusky Warbler in the Farallon Islands. Why not? Simply because these species are not known to be kept in captivity. Yet ornithologists will sigh in exasperation over reports of American Flamingo, Tufted Duck, Garganey or Brambling in the Northeast, simply because these species are commonly kept in captivity. That these highly migratory species routinely appear far beyond their normal limits is apparently discounted, and thus they are regarded as "more likely" to be escapes. This sort of reasoning begs the question of how often captive birds have been known to escape, survive, and subsequently be reported by birders. My argument is that this occurs infrequently, and the burden of proof rests upon those who cry "escape" to show that this in fact represents a viable alternative to vagrancy.

Many arguments for rejecting certain records as "presumed escapes" are obviously circular. For example, it is said that American Flamingos are poor candidates for vagrancy because there are very few confirmed instances in which the species has occurred far outside its normal range. Therefore, records 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc., of flamingos far beyond the normal range

are considered suspect, because American Flamingos are poor candidates for vagrancy, etc. Furthermore, flamingos appearing in the Northeast are usually very pale in coloration. Therefore, the escape proponents proclaim, the birds were probably recently kept in captivity. They neglect the obvious: immature flamingos, the most likely individuals to wander, are much paler than the adults. Indeed, a record of a vivid adult flamingo in the Northeast should be more suspect than that of a "faded" immature.

How does one prove that a given individual is an escaped cage bird? One usually cannot. However, if escaped cage birds now living free are as rampant as some would have us believe, then certainly there should exist numerous records of wild birds showing unambiguous evidence of having been captive, e.g., a band, excessive abrasion of the wing and tail feathers, abnormal bill growth, or calloused feet. My impression is that birds that escape from the Bronx Zoo, from Sea World in San Diego, or from other places of confinement do not travel far but remain close to their "free" food source. I think that a quantitative study comparing the frequency of vagrancy with the frequency of dispersal of escapes might reveal that the former phenomenon occurs more often.

So why belabor this point? Because I think that a cynical attitude towards the origins of probable vagrants has hindered our perceptions of very real biological phenomena. Vagrancy is, despite many published statements to the contrary, of exceptional biological importance in determining distributional patterns of birds throughout the world, albeit over very extended time periods. The biological species concept, as articulated by Ernst Mayr, requires geographical isolation to explain the evolution of reproductive isolating mechanisms. Geographical isolation must have been achieved originally in many instances by "vagrancy." Consider the distribution of species of rails among isolated islands in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The presence of such distinctive species as the Laysan, Inaccessible Island, and Chatham Island rails presupposes at least two (in each instance) remarkable feats of dispersal over thousands of miles of open ocean. Of course, the distinctive avifaunas of the Galapagos and Hawaiian Islands are the end result of similar instances of vagrancy.

Now, it may be impossible to witness an instance of avian speciation within the span of a human lifetime, but the above examples (and there could be as many as 8600), should indicate the value of studying vagrants. The discovery of a Garganey at Plum Island, Massachusetts, in May 1968 stirred little excitement because the bird was dismissed as an escape. An examination of records before and since then, however, reveals that Garganeys have occurred in eastern North America in the spring during a remarkably limited span of dates. Such a pattern would be expected from a sample of wild birds,

but would be close to impossible to explain had all or most of the birds been escapes. (Do zoo keepers suddenly become more lax in restraining their birds during March?) Similarly, the occurrence of several species of Palearctic waterfowl and finches in North America, many of which are kept in captivity, seems to fall into discrete temporal patterns; this, again, suggests that wild birds are involved.

So what is the proper approach for compilers and authors of regional bird atlases? I think it is high time to stop worrying about the provenance of individual birds and publish all records of the potential vagrants; the only way to determine the validity of any one is to compare it with future occurrences. We don't know what causes birds to wander far afield. But we may enhance our chances of finding out by maintaining an open eye, ear, and mind with respect to any species that turn up within our geographical area, however bizarre, outlandish or unexpected.

RICHARD VEIT, a peregrinating Massachusetts birder and formerly a compiler of records for BOEM, tossed the above essay on Bird Observer's desk on his way out the door to the west coast where he is currently a doctoral candidate (University of California at Irvine), specializing in studies of seabirds of the southern hemisphere. This summer Dick completed The Birds of Massachusetts (with co-author, Richard Forster) as part of the work for his master's degree at the University of Massachusetts.

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