

## MORE ON RECORDS OF BIRDS

by Dorothy R. Arvidson, Arlington

"Bird watching embraces individual enterprise on the one hand, collective effort on the other. Above all else, it is marked by a ready exchange of experience, by a high regard for truth, and by a conviction that wild birds express the most spectacular development of nature."

Joseph J. Hickey: Preface, A Guide to Bird Watching, 1943.

Surely no one has stated these precepts better. But what has this to do with the records of birds? Please bear with me. Bird Observer, since its inception in 1973, has been concerned here because this journal serves as an agency for Hickey's "ready exchange of experience." One of several ways that we accomplish this end is by publishing the monthly Field Records and by striving for accuracy in the compilation with, always, a "high regard for truth." And this process requires a prodigious expenditure of time, labor, and effort by a dedicated and entirely volunteer staff.

This effort will have been worthwhile if we succeed in creating, over a period of time, a reliable compendium of information about the changing status, migration, and seasonal occurrence of the birds of eastern Massachusetts. If birds can be regarded as a "litmus of the environment" (Roger Tory Peterson's words), then we must record their increase or decline in order to take remedial action. Birding is not a science, but it is a realm of activity where amateurs can make a real contribution to ornithology and environmental studies. One must have a reasonable level of birding skill to do this and must be a meticulous observer willing to abide by certain rules.

It is difficult to set up exact rules for identifying birds, but there are some techniques to be avoided, particularly if the sighting is to be entered in the records. *Identification by elimination* can lead one far astray, because the original premise about the group to which the bird belongs might be wrong, the observer's information incomplete, or the observation inadequate - failure to see a field mark does not always mean it isn't present. Still less reliable is "*postmortem*" *identification*. One should be suspicious of flashes of inspiration as to the identity of the bird that occur after you and the bird have parted company, especially if you rely on memory alone as you consult reference books. Furthermore, not every bird *can* be identified for reasons of poor conditions at the sighting, lack of information about plumages or habits, or aberrancy of the bird itself (extreme variation from the norm of the species).

Like most groups that work with field records, Bird Observer staff regularly receives complaints along the following lines. "What happened to my report of 22 Pine Siskins flying over? There haven't been any reports this year, so I should think you'd be glad to have that one." Or, "What about that early Snow Bunting I saw in the flock of House Sparrows?" And, "Whatever happened to the Pileated Woodpeckers reported from South Boston. Why aren't they in the field records?" Sometimes, the criticism takes another direction. One reader, an accomplished birder, feels that

Bird Observer "has been far too lenient in accepting undocumented records." He suggests that "they should come in a special section . . . called 'uncorroborated reports' as is done by the editors of the middlewestern prairie region of American Birds," and further decries the printing of reports of species such as Eurasian Wigeon without notation of sex or whether any details have been received. Another competent critic notes that our record coverage is very uneven, that there are areas of eastern Massachusetts that are almost never represented in the records.

The greatest problem for people who deal with bird records arises from the reports of unusual sightings. These are not the province of experts alone but may be reported by any of us. It was an alert beginner who provided the first Massachusetts' record of Townsend's Warbler and unknown "out-of-staters" who sighted (and fortunately, carefully photographed) the Spotted Redshank. Confirmation is a simple matter when a bird remains in an area long enough to be seen by numbers of qualified people or to be well-recorded on film or tape. But what of the bird that is seen only once, or very briefly, or by a single individual? Do we risk losing valuable data if such sightings are ignored or not recorded? And what about records of vagrants (Eurasian Siskin, Western Reef Heron, Jackdaws, and Tufted Ducks) that may well be escaped cage-birds? This issue was well-addressed by Richard Veit [see "Escapes Versus Vagrants: A Comment," Bird Observer 11(6): 309].

It may help us as observers and reporters of birds to review the traditional standards and criteria that formed the basis for the evaluation of records at the present time. In 1955 (not so long ago, actually) Griscom recommended for adoption in Massachusetts, an "excellent set of rules" that had been established by the New York State Bird Book Committee in that same year as criteria for examining bird reports being considered for state records. This "sensible set of criteria" defined three categories of records:

a. "Wholly Acceptable." This includes records supported by a fully documented, available specimen, by an unquestionable and documented photograph or motion picture, by a documented sound recording, by a specimen no longer available but previously verified by a competent authority and later released, by circumstantial evidence (nest, egg, or part of specimen). Finally, by a record of an *easily* identified species, supported by the *multiple* observations of *competent* observers and *appropriate as to date and place*.

b. "Acceptable," in which the rules for sight records are slightly relaxed. Records which do not meet these criteria are deemed questionable and *will not be considered without strong supporting evidence*.

c. "Unacceptable" under any circumstances are: A sight record of a species *difficult to identify, inappropriate as to date or place, for which no previous records exist, by a single observer*; a sight record of a species difficult to identify, regardless of date, place, or previous records, by an observer or observers of *unknown competence or known incompetence*; a record of any kind for which there is no documentation or supporting evidence; and a record of a species which might be an escaped or released cage-bird. [All the italics are mine.]

The foregoing is quoted from Ludlow Griscom and Dorothy Snyder: The Birds of Massachusetts - An Annotated and Revised Check List, Peabody Museum, Salem, 1955, pages 9-10. Records committees have struggled over the years to maintain these rigorous standards with more or less success, and probably some notable records have fallen by the way. Richard Forster can recall in his personal records a Bell's Vireo in Marblehead Neck on May 16, 1964, and a LeConte's Sparrow in Wellesley that he did not report: they did not constitute acceptable records under that system of evaluation. Granted that no system is perfect. Is there any reasonable solution? Many avian records committees have accepted a system based on "details provided" by the observers, and a common complaint of compilers is that "no details were submitted." WESTERN Tanager asks in the March 1984 issue, "Could it be that *so many birders do not make notes* on rare or unusual species? Is it that so many participants . . . do not know how to report the sighting with details?" [C. Bernstein, "Details on Details," Western Tanager 50(6): 1-3.] Again, the italics are mine.

The highly respected journal, British Birds, has listed all the details that ideally should be noted and reported for any unusual sighting. These field notes fall into three categories.

1. *NOTES TAKEN WHILE THE BIRD IS IN VIEW.* (This assumes that every birder carries with him a field notebook or tape recorder.) These notes include a description of the form and structure of the head, bill, legs, wings, and tail compared to similar species; the bird's size and how it was determined - by estimation, measurement, or comparison; All distinctive markings of white or color; the entire plumage; color of eyes, bill, legs and feet; actions and flight, also compared to similar species; vocalizations; and a *field sketch!*

2. *NOTES TAKEN AFTER THE BIRD HAS DEPARTED OR BEEN LEFT UNDISTURBED.* Here should be noted associated birds; magnifying instruments used and their power; other factors affecting the observation (time of day, light and its direction, wind, and visibility); angle of view (above or below, etc.), whether the bird was at rest or in flight, and whether entirely visible or partly obscured; and finally, the length of the observation.

3. *DETAILS GIVEN IF THE RECORD IS SUBMITTED.* This includes the observers' prior experience with the bird and other species with which it may be confused; the steps you took to obtain confirmation by experienced observers; and *names of accredited birders to vouch for you*, should you be unknown or an inexperienced birder.

Although the above is more graciously stated, requirements are not so very different in England from what was expected by Griscom. Taking the initiative and responsibility for providing such a field report is the contribution that can be made by the birder who is so fortunate as to encounter a rare bird. If you make an unusual sighting in Massachusetts, you should send to Ruth Emery a written report (to insure that the sighting is included in the Records File), and a duplicate, including a xerox of your field notes and sketch, should be given to Mass. Audubon or any member of the Records ("Rare Birds") Committee. The present members of this group are James Baird, Paul Buckley, Richard Forster (chairman), Rick Heil, Chris Leahy, Blair Nikula, Wayne Petersen, Bruce Sorrie, Robert Stymeist, and Richard Veit. So, on your toes! Here's to good birding and conscientious reporting. And, may your next bird be a lifer - if not a rarity!

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## An Auction of Natural History Items

The South Shore Regional Office of the Massachusetts Audubon Society and W. Torrey Little, Inc., Auctioneer, are presenting an auction of natural history materials in August of 1985. This will be a full day dedicated to the resale of quality items that relate to our natural world. There are already two John James Audubon prints (Havell) and a set of *Birds of Massachusetts* (Forbush) committed to the auction.

This is an opportunity for you to consign any item that you have that is of reasonable value. It is presumed that first edition books, collections of field guides, works of art and other similar items will be gathered. The consignor will receive 90 percent of the hammer price for those items over \$500 in value and 85 percent for items under \$500. A 10 percent fee will be charged to the purchaser above the hammer price. Any items donated outright to the Society will be valued at the hammer price and are tax-deductible.

Please call the Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Regional Office at (617) 837-9400 for information on entering pieces in the auction.

Catalogs should be available two or three weeks ahead of time. There will be a printing and mailing fee for the catalog. W. Torrey Little, Inc. will donate all proceeds, above expenses to the Society.



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