

## WHAT IS A RECORD?

by P. William Smith, Hingham

I'd like to add another perspective to the recent series of articles and letters that have appeared in Bird Observer on the subject of records. I think all these articles may confuse "records" with "reports." People submit their field notes in various forms to Bird Observer, American Birds, and similar publications. Initially they are best thought of as reports. The people who deal with them have the role of compiling these reports, editing them down to the space allotted for publishing them by culling out the least significant, and pointing out those that appear to be the most significant.

I do not believe that this process by itself transforms these reports into records, regardless of the documentation that accompanies them or the editor's opinion of their correctness. A "record" is an avian occurrence with sufficient convincing supporting material to stand the tests of time and repeated scientific inquiry. The A.O.U. Check-list Committee, for example, generally admits occurrences to the Check-list as records only if supporting material (which generally is maintained in files accessible to anyone) is sufficiently comprehensive and convincing. However, they have the luxury of time to gather the evidence and the collective wisdom of a jury, factors absent in timely publications such as Bird Observer or American Birds. The British Rarities Committee, which routinely accepts thoroughly documented sight records and strongly opposes collecting, publishes an annual report each November for preceding years. The current monthly summaries published in British Birds have the caveat that these are largely unchecked reports, not authenticated records.

The purpose, I believe, of publishing field notes in a timely fashion is not to present records but rather to provide a current summary of significant reports in order to promote and maintain the interest of the reporting network, to encourage people to follow up quickly on emerging patterns and trends, and to give future researchers and authors the widest possible amount of information to work from. Some people may underestimate the fragility of the reporting network and the egos of the human beings who compose it. While censorship is certainly a legitimate component of the process of compiling and editing field notes, it should be performed with great delicateness, primarily in situations where the editor has good evidence that a particular report is invalid or the reporter is unreliable. Otherwise, in addition to risking the loss of the reporter's willingness to report, the editor risks suppressing valid records, possibly denying the opportunity to establish or corroborate significant patterns of vagrancy. This may once have been the case on the West Coast with respect to the appearance of most eastern passerines, for example, and only fairly recently has the extent of this phenomenon been determined. I recall

being told that a Scarlet Tanager that several people and I saw in California in 1958 probably escaped from captivity! Observers may also underplay their own discoveries, because the lack of precedence may make them seem invalid or unacceptable. Others may limit their search expectations, not looking for Common (Mew) Gulls among the Ringbills, for example, because they have no idea Mews might be present.

Anyone using these compilations, such as authors of checklists and birdbooks, should understand their limitations and draw on them accordingly. They may make an excellent starting point for research but only offer a general basis for a scientifically oriented compilation of avifauna. Most people who use them realize this, and I believe the recent spate of criticism about them in Bird Observer and elsewhere is due primarily to frustration at the widespread lack of investigation by an active and thorough avian records committee, both here in Massachusetts and in many other jurisdictions.

Thus, I respect Blom's comments (BOEM 13: 80-82, April 1985) about documenting bird sightings, but I think these ideas have more to do with submitting data to the state records committee than with the monthly material in Bird Observer, which should be called "FIELD REPORTS" to avoid the very confusion I am discussing. Finally, I empathize tremendously with Nikula's "Thoughts. . ." (BOEM 13: 143-144, June 1985), for I too was a regional editor for a number of years and faced most of the same pressures and dilemmas. I disagree, however, that the burden of proof lies with the observer for timely regional reporting summaries in publications like American Birds. Rather, at this stage, the burden lies more with the editor in rejecting them.

I haven't intended to imply that field notes should be submitted without documentation or that field note editors shouldn't try to distinguish significant reports from speculative or incorrect ones. Rather, I suggest that we not expect these compilations to represent true records and instead focus on building enthusiastic networks of observers and reporters and on providing the most material possible to every one.

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