

## THE MASSACHUSETTS AVIAN RECORDS COMMITTEE

by Wayne R. Petersen

To lend credibility to the increasing volume of unusual bird reports which annually appear in journals such as *American Birds* and *Bird Observer*, the need for objective, rational, and qualified evaluation of such reports has become increasingly obvious. In order to be credible and accepted into the scientific record, bird sighting reports must be systematically subjected to responsible and unbiased analysis and evaluation. To that end, the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC) has been formed to evaluate bird sighting reports in the state of Massachusetts.

A bird records committee for Massachusetts is long overdue. Beginning in 1978, Brad Blodget, state ornithologist for the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, started maintaining an "official" Massachusetts bird list. Using clearly defined criteria and rigorous standards of acceptance for sight records, Blodget produced an exemplary bird list. Blodget's list, however, relies on specimen or photographic evidence to substantiate the report, or requires that "three or more observers with extensive field experience in Massachusetts" substantiate a report of a species new to the state list. Blodget labeled bird reports failing to meet these rigorous criteria as "problematical." It is likely, however, that the majority of the problematic species were correctly identified in Massachusetts. The formation of MARC will provide an expanded, yet still rigorous, set of criteria and will involve more than one person to evaluate bird sighting reports.

MARC's first organizational meeting was in 1989. In the months since, the MARC has: (1) finalized a set of bylaws; (2) established a protocol for processing unusual bird reports; and (3) set about addressing the responsibilities put forth in the bylaws. To quote from the bylaws, "The purpose of the MARC shall be to evaluate and document reports of unusual occurrences of birds in Massachusetts for the purpose of providing a means by which such reports can gain acceptance as valuable scientific data and for maintaining an official Massachusetts bird list."

The most important priority for the MARC is to produce a state bird list that conforms as closely as possible to the model provided by Blodget, yet be as unencumbered by problematical categories and provisional records as possible. In addition future activities of the committee will adhere to a policy that will require documentation for bird reports in any of the following categories:

1. Any report of a species that would represent a first Massachusetts record

2. Any report of a rare or difficult to identify species as defined by the MARC
3. Any report of a species that would represent a first Massachusetts nesting record.

Furthermore certain bird reports will be evaluated at the discretion of the committee and shall include the following:

4. Any species reported four weeks earlier than the week of arrival or four weeks later than the week of departure as indicated on the Massachusetts Daily Field Card
5. Any species occurring in a totally unexpected geographical location (e.g., coastal species inland and inland species at the coast)
6. Any species that has nested fewer than five times in Massachusetts
7. Any extralimital nesting of a species within Massachusetts.

The obvious intent of these criteria is to establish guidelines that will objectively evaluate unusual Massachusetts bird reports but will also be flexible enough to eliminate processing bird reports that local bird record-keepers can readily arbitrate. In the future the MARC will publish a list of "rare or difficult-to-identify species" that will automatically require specific action by the committee. All Massachusetts bird clubs and bird record compilers will receive copies of the MARC's bylaws, which will be available upon request. The activities of the MARC and the results of the committee's actions will be regularly published in *Bird Observer* and *Bird News of Western Massachusetts*, and an archive for the MARC's activities will be maintained at the Massachusetts Audubon Society in Lincoln.

For birders interested in learning more about the important role bird records committees can play in their region, the December 1990 issue of *Birding* contained a fine summary article by Don Roberson on the role and status of bird records committees in North America. Roberson presented statistics about the organization and machinations of these different committees and discussed the rationale used by the various groups.

In conclusion, birders are encouraged to direct specific questions concerning the MARC to any of the committee's members. At the present time, the MARC comprises the following individuals: Kathleen Anderson, Bradford Blodget, Richard Forster, Seth Kellogg, Mark Lynch, Blair Nikula, Simon Perkins, Wayne Petersen (Chair), Robert Stymeist, and Richard Walton (nonvoting Secretary). We will continue to publish information about the MARC in the months ahead as the committee becomes fully operational.

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