

ON RECORDS OF BIRDS

by the Staff

BIRD OBSERVER OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS publishes in each issue two one-month summaries of bird species identified within the ten-county area shown on the map inside the front cover. These summaries are drawn from reports submitted to the compilers by bird-watchers throughout the area. The publication of these summaries is, of course, a major function of our magazine, and we are deeply grateful to all of the dedicated birders who, month after month, take the time to write out the reports which form the primary data.

Obvious limitations of space prevent the publication of many records which are sent in to us. Less frequently a report of an unusual sighting is rejected for lack of convincing documentation. Unfortunately, the omission or rejection of certain of these records has been in the past a cause of hard feelings, and it is therefore incumbent upon you to make certain points plain:

1. The integrity of the reporter is assumed; his expertise is not. None of us is fully familiar with every species which may appear within our area. Moreover, atypical or freak individuals are not uncommon within the avian world, and even the professional ornithologist is necessarily "inexperienced" with respect to aberrations of this sort.
2. The most competent and experienced observers do make mistakes. Unusual wind conditions or lighting effects often drastically change the appearance of a bird and lead to misidentification. Professional field ornithologists are quick to admit to this possibility, and we should follow their example.
3. Most of our readers and reporters are amateurs for whom birding is a hobby, a sport, a source of pleasure. BIRD OBSERVER is directed primarily toward this audience. However, our magazine is also on occasion a source of scientific data. Hence, we are obliged as compilers to adhere to generally accepted standards with regard to the reporting of unusual sightings. In past years, such reports were never acceptable without the securing of a specimen. More recently, photographs have come to be accepted as "incontrovertible evidence."

Our policy has never been this strict, and we have from the beginning published reports of unusual sightings backed by no more than a good written description. But conservatism IS our rule. To accept a misidentification and to reject a correct identification are both compiling errors--but they are not of equal seriousness. Compilers generally agree that the former is the more serious error. We concur in this attitude, and it is therefore to be expected that perfectly valid sightings will from time to time be rejected. The observer need draw no inference from this action. Rejection of a report sometimes results from a decision by the compilers that a misidentification has occurred. More frequently no such suggestion is intended. Rather, the rejection should be taken to mean simply that the submitted evidence fails to convince the compilers beyond all reasonable doubt of the correctness of the identification.

A. Minimal data for all reports.

Whatever the report may be, please be sure to include the following data:

1. Species name.
2. Accurate count or careful estimate.
3. Immature or adult plumage (if determinable).
4. Sex (if determinable).
5. Date and place of observation.
6. Observer(s).

The estimating of large numbers of birds is clearly an art, but one which can be learned. Reporters are urged to read Robert Arbib's article, "On the art of estimating birds," from the August 1972 issue of American Birds. Reprints are available for 25¢ from: American Birds, 950 Third Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10022.

B. Which reports are most noteworthy?

The compilers are most interested in reports of the following types:

1. Early and late dates for migratory species.
2. Maximum counts for migrants or non-breeding visitors.
3. Unusually high or abnormally low numbers of the more common species.

4. Species outside their normal ranges, especially when such records may point to breeding range extensions.
5. Species not on the current M.A.S. yearly checklist.

The very active birder will know from his own experience and records which reports are of greatest interest. The less experienced or less vigorous observer may need help in determining which reports to submit. What is an early date for Yellow Warblers? What is an unusually high count of them?

Fortunately, in Massachusetts there are several easily obtained books and pamphlets detailing information of this type. We urge all reporters to obtain and consult the following:

1. Griscom, L. and Snyder, D.E., The Birds of Massachusetts (Salem: Peabody Museum, 1955).
2. Bailey, W., Birds in Massachusetts, Where and When to Find Them, available from Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Mass.
3. Hill, Norman P., The Birds of Cape Cod, Massachusetts (New York: Morrow, 1965). (Now out of print)
4. Bailey, W., Birds of the Cape Cod National Seashore, and its supplement.

C. Reports of "difficult" species.

In the opinion of the compilers, certain of the species on the current M.A.S. Checklist, although of regular occurrence, are rather difficult to identify. We would single out the following:

Cory's Shearwater
 Leach's Storm-Petrel
 Cormorants out of breeding season
 Little Blue Heron (immature) vs. Snowy Egret
 Yellow-crowned Night Heron (immature)
 European and American Wigeons (females)
 Greater Scaup vs. Lesser Scaup
 Common vs. Barrow's Goldeneye (females)
 King Eider (females)
 Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and Merlin
 King Rail vs. Clapper Rail
 Baird's Sandpiper and Western Sandpiper
 Short-billed vs. Long-billed Dowitcher
 Reeve
 Red Phalarope (winter plumage)
 Pomarine Jaeger vs. Parasitic Jaeger
 Glaucous and Iceland Gulls
 Little Gull
 Forster's Tern
 Arctic Tern
 Royal Tern and Caspian Tern
 Razorbill
 Willow and Alder Flycatchers
 Fish Crow
 Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes
 Northern and Loggerhead Shrikes
 Philadelphia Vireo
 Worm-eating Warbler
 Orange-crowned Warbler
 Cape May, Pine, Blackpoll and Bay-breasted Warblers (immatures)
 Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes
 Connecticut and Mourning Warblers
 House Finch
 Lincoln's Sparrow

The birds on this list are here for various reasons. In some cases (e.g., Lesser Scaup Duck, Philadelphia Vireo, Willow and Alder Flycatchers), the species are objectively difficult to identify, i.e., they are genuine sibling species. Certain of these species (e.g., Connecticut and Mourning Warblers) are as a rule uncooperative, allowing a far from perfect viewing. For some, the information in the standard field guides is, in our opinion, misleading (e.g., the "wing-length criterion" for Iceland and Glaucous Gulls).

Finally, a large group of species is included on this list for the simple reason that a "well-publicized" instance of misidentification by an observer whom we regard as essentially competent is known to us.

The compilers would hope that, in addition to the basic data listed above in paragraph A, reports of these species would contain details of the diagnostic characteristics actually observed or heard. Did you clearly see the vermiculations on the side of that Lesser Scaup? If so, enough said. Did that Alder Flycatcher sing its territorial song? In what habitat was it? At what elevation?

Massachusetts Audubon Society offers a birder's kit for \$5.15 per year, which includes mailings of occasional short papers on field identification problems. Eleven of these have appeared so far, and all are excellent. We urge you to subscribe.

D. Reports of rarities.

Any report of a species not on the M.A.S. Checklist requires documentation of a more extensive nature. The additional information submitted should usually include the following:

1. Exact location and description of the habitat in which the bird occurred.
2. Time of day and duration of observation.
3. Weather conditions (esp. wind direction and speed) both during the observation and in the preceding hours and days.
4. Lighting conditions.
5. Optical equipment in use and distance of the bird.
6. Primary Identification.
 - a. Size, shape and posture of the bird, plumage description, any other visual characters noted.
 - b. Songs or other sounds heard.
 - c. Behavior of the bird, description of its movements. (On what was the bird feeding? In flight, did it soar? What was its wingbeat velocity? Etc.)
 - d. Associates, i.e., what other species were present? Of these, with which did the bird fraternize? (Instances of interspecific hostility are often excellent clues as to the identity of a bird.)
7. Differential Diagnosis.
 - a. With which other species was a direct comparison made? What conclusions were reached as a result of these comparisons?
 - b. Which other species were considered as possible identifications, however briefly and perfunctorily? How was each of these eliminated?

The superior field observer is often distinguished most clearly by his excellence in and attention to the differential diagnosis. Remember the old maxim: a rare or unusual view of a common bird is much more probable than a sighting of a rare or unusual bird. So be sure to check through in your mind ALL realistic alternatives, however unlikely they may at first seem--and then submit your conclusions to the compilers.

8. Additional supporting evidence, e.g., drawings, tape-recordings or photographs, if available. The clearer this evidence, the less verbal description is necessary.
9. Names of all observers, and a record of any disagreements in identification. Were the observers immediately aware of the bird's potential rarity?

BIRD OBSERVER has already published two fully documented reports which may be used as models:

1. Sighting of a Black-browed Albatross, by Richard R. Veit (Vol. 1, No. 6, p. 137).
2. A Note on Brewer's Blackbird in New England, by Wayne R. Petersen (Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 55).

Obviously, not every such report need be in publishable form, but the submitted report will be kept on file and may be made available for serious ornithological research. Some of the Massachusetts reports written in 1900 are still consulted today. Try to keep this in mind as you write your own reports. Be complete. The reader in the year 2050 may need those details.

A few more words of advice are in order:

1. Take notes at the time of your sighting, preferably before consulting a reference book.

2. In describing a bird don't copy the description from a field guide. The impression given is that the bird was not very carefully scrutinized. Try to include descriptive details which you have never seen in print.
3. Try to get confirmation of the sighting. A good photograph is unbeatable as evidence.
4. Notify local birders quickly so that other observers can confirm the identification.



THE GREAT GRAY OWL

Great Gray Owl photograph courtesy of the Lawrence Eagle-Tribune.

In the early afternoon of January 6th, 1977, a teacher at the West Elementary School in Andover telephoned me that she was sure that the large owl reposing 15 feet up in a birch tree by the edge of the school's parking lot was a Great Gray. It had flown there in the morning and remained, paying no attention to the many children playing beneath. As soon as I saw it, I was convinced that the identification was correct--noting every field mark and in particular the white collar with the dark spot in the center. But to make sure, the eyes had to be seen. It took 20 minutes of jumping up and down and shouting to induce the owl to "open up" and they were yellow. I telephoned the Massachusetts Audubon Society and other interested persons. Some arrived in time to see it. But many were disappointed as he flew off towards the end of the afternoon--not to be seen again there. Several people tried unsuccessfully the next day in the big snowstorm to find it, but to no avail.

Juliet R. Kellogg