Letters

It is our hope that *Continental Birdlife* will develop an active and critical readership. Almost any article of the sorts that we publish has the potential to become a springboard to further discussion; so if you feel inclined to comment on anything in these pages, please do so. While we don't have time to answer all letters personally, we will print any that bring up meaningful points related to articles published previously. For that matter, we welcome letters that are relevant to any current topic in North American field ornithology.

MORE ON FLICKERS

An interesting dichotomy developed in the responses to our flicker-identification article (*C.B.* 1 (1): 4-15, February 1979). Many readers, we were glad to hear, appreciated this in-depth approach to a rather obscure field problem. However, there were others who told us frankly that they would prefer material on identification at the species level. All the comments of both kinds are appreciated here. We have identification articles in preparation dealing with a variety of field problems, and hopefully these will, among them, be able to please both camps.

Two specific comments were received which we found interesting:

> Had I seen your scholarly paper on flickers before its publication, I'd have asked you to include some discussion (and possibly some explanation) of a hybrid pattern that I have yet to see, namely, a *male* bird with black moustachial streaks and *no* red nape patch. Does such a hybrid ever occur? If you know of specimens, do tell me of them, for I have looked for them in vain and I must have examined several hundred specimens, all told.
>
> George Miksch Sutton
> Norman, Oklahoma

To fill in a bit of background for the reader: male flickers of the eastern or "Yellow-shafted" form have red nape patches and black moustachial (malar) streaks, while the western "Red-shafted" flicker males lack the red nape patch and have red malar streaks. Where the two forms meet and hybridize, birds with various combinations of characters are found. As Dr. Sutton pointed out in his *Oklahoma Birds* (1967: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman), and as I should have mentioned in my article, hybrids having both red malar streaks and red nape patches occur frequently; but birds showing the opposite combination of characters — black malar streaks and no nape patch — are seemingly impossible to find.

My own modest researches into the subject have undoubtedly been less thorough than Dr. Sutton's, but for what it is worth, I too have sought and failed to find hybrids displaying this pattern. And I can suggest no explanation for this paradox. However, it is interesting to note that the red nape patch is (to put it unscientifically) a "strong" character, cropping up in *some* individuals of *all* races of the Common Flicker, and doing so more often in males than in females. Furthermore, a surprisingly high percentage of the male Yellow-shafted X Red-shafted hybrids I have encountered have shown at least a trace of the red nape patch; those that did not usually had color patterns heavily dominated by Red-shafted characters. Perhaps a hybrid must have a lot of Red-shafted ancestry to be able to "override" the red nape patch. These considerations could be relevant if the hybrid pattern that Dr. Sutton describes is merely a rare one. If in fact this pattern *never* occurs, then the explanation probably lies in the field of genetic linkages and beyond the scope of this journal.

At any rate, our readers are hereby advised that we would like to hear about (and, particularly, to see photographs of) any hybrid flickers with pure black malar streaks and no trace of the red nape patch. — *K.K.*

I was interested in your article on the flicker forms. You did not mention Paul Julian's article on "A Proposal for Reporting Flickers in Colorado" (Colorado Field Ornithologist 14: 16, Dec. 1972). He lives in the hybrid zone along the east slope of the Rockies, and had read Short's article. He was stimulated by the fact that Colorado birders reported flickers as Red-shafted or Yellow-shafted even though they were in the hybrid zone. So he proposed a grading system based on six scores as a measure of the mixing. He dealt, of course, with only the two forms and I am not sure his approach would help here [Arizona] but it was an interesting suggestion.

William A. Davis
Tucson, Arizona

That is an interesting thought. It is doubtful that such a system could be applied on a continent-wide basis, but observers who live in hybrid

zones and who are sufficiently interested might try developing their own "field-expedient hybrid index" as a rapid way of describing individual hybrids in their daily notes. — *K.K.*

MORE ON HARLEQUIN DUCKS

David Stemple wrote to point out that we should have at least mentioned the subspecies question in Harlequin Ducks *H. histrionicus* — otherwise some readers might wonder why no attempt was made to guess the race of the Harlequin in Sonora (*C.B.* 1 (1): 16-17, February 1979).

The population of Harlequins in northwestern North America and northeastern Asia has been called by some *H. h. pacificus,* a subspecies distinct from the birds of northeastern North America, Greenland, and Iceland. In his original description of *pacificus,* Brooks (1915 — *Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool. Harvard* 59(5): 393) characterized it as being larger than the Atlantic area birds, with a larger bill, and with the chestnut in the stripes on either side of the crown less developed. Subsequent authors have pointed out that the amount of chestnut and white in the head pattern varies individually and with the plumage sequence, leaving measurements as the only criterion for recognition of this race. Published data indicate that the Pacific birds do average larger-billed (and slightly larger overall); but there is much overlap in the measurements, and the subspecies are not recognized by most current authorities (e.g., *A.O.U. Check-list of North American birds, fifth edition,* 1957; R.S. Palmer 1976, *Handbook of North American Birds, Volume 3).*

In studying museum specimens recently (and looking critically at bill size) I found noticeable differences between the extreme individuals of the two populations (i.e., small-billed Atlantic and large-billed Pacific birds); but putting these aside, I was generally unable to guess the origins of the majority of specimens without consulting the labels. The upshot of this is that it might well have been impossible to determine the origin of the Sonoran Harlequin even in the hand. So we would prefer not to hazard an opinion on the basis of photographs . . . but if any qualified researchers would like to try, we will be glad to share our file of photos of the Sonoran bird. — *K.K.*