

ONTARIO BIRDS



The Journal of the
Ontario Field Ornithologists

Volume 2 Number 3
December 1984

Ian Jones
Dec. '84



Ontario Birds

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Material should be double-spaced and type-written if possible.

Editorial Policy

Ontario Birds is the journal of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. Its aim is to provide a vehicle for the documentation of the birds of Ontario. We encourage the submission of full length articles or short notes on the status of bird species in Ontario, significant provincial or county distributional records, tips on bird identification, behavioural observations of birds in Ontario, location guides to significant birdwatching areas in Ontario, book reviews and

similar material of interest on Ontario birds. We do not accept submissions dealing with “listing” and we discourage Seasonal Reports of bird sightings as these are covered by *Bird Finding in Canada* and *American Birds*, respectively. Distributional records of species for which the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) requires documentation must be accepted by them before they can be published in *Ontario Birds*.

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Cover Illustration: Ross' Gull, a new bird for Ontario by Ian Jones.

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Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors,
 I note that 'we' do not encourage articles dealing with 'listing', so as not to compete with *Birdfinding in Canada*. I also see that we do not encourage articles on 'seasonal distribution' as they are covered in *American Birds*, etc., and I conclude that we also wish to keep our journal as professional as possible. In other words . . . no playing of games vis à vis *Birding* (Am. Birding Assoc.). So, unless I have misread the full intent of OFO, I must make comment (with all due respect to the author, M. Cadman) that I feel the 'Atlas Mystery Map' game/quiz really does not belong in *Ontario Birds*. I do not mean to be a stickler about this, but it is shades of *Birding*, and while I subscribe to and enjoy their journal, I don't think ours should mirror (in any way) their publication. If Cadman would submit an article on the distribution of the bird in question, it would serve greater purpose than a quiz. Likewise, if he wishes to pique the interest of OFO members in the Atlas project, he should simply do an article or place a display ad. I for one am in opposition to the quiz aspect in our journal.

Sincerely
 Jim Richards
 Orono, Ontario

Eds. Comment: Jim's points are well taken and we feel a short reply is in order. In designing the

contents of *Ontario Birds*, we are constantly on the lookout for new ideas: ideas from members, other journals and a few of our own. Just because a feature may have originated with or come from another journal is not cause to disregard it. We consider each idea on its own merit, on how useful it will be to our members, the opinions of the Executive and our own views as Editors.

Articles on 'Listing' and 'Seasonal Summaries' have the disadvantage of being lengthy contributions and items to which entire journals already are devoted. The Birding Site Guides, Atlas Mystery Maps and inclusion of our journal name and issues at the bottom of each page were ideas 'taken' from other journals but ones which we felt improved *Ontario Birds*. The Mystery Map idea came from Mike Cadman and we accepted it knowing how successful it had been in *British Birds*, several years before *Birding* ever thought of it.

Dear Editors,
 Today I got the most recent issue of *Ontario Birds* in the mail, and I must say, I was truly impressed! This is a top notch journal! The Henslow's Sparrow article by Richard Knapton was top notch, and Mr. Fraser's review of the "new" *Birds of North America*, first rate! Keep up the good work!

Mark Gawn
 Ottawa, Ontario

A GUEST EDITORIAL

On Writing Observational Notes

by

Martin K. McNicholl

A glance through the first issues of *Ontario Birds* shows relatively few notes on bird behaviour or ecology, notes that I shall term "observational", as opposed to distributional. By not commenting on the desirability of short distributional (including seasonal) notes in the following remarks, I do not wish to belittle them (I have written several myself), but rather I am assuming that their value will be self-evident to any person whose interests would compel him or her to join OFO and subscribe to the journal. The first two volumes of *Ontario Birds* contain observational notes on Boreal Owls feeding on flying squirrels, hummingbird migration, a crepuscular flight of woodcock and a note on a crow roost. All other notes to date have been distributional in scope with the exception of two editorials on bird names. Your editors would like to see more notes on behaviour, ecological relationships, and similar topics—

essentially what used to be lumped under "life history."

The champion journal of observational notes must be *British Birds*. A glance through one issue selected at random (Vol. 75, number 2, 1982) shows a typical range of topics: Turnstone feeding on gull excrement, unusual upperwing pattern of Little Gull, second-winter Common Gull with prominent tail band, apparent bigamy by Black Redstart, feeding association between male and juvenile Song Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher catching and eating large butterflies, Chough attracted to burnt areas for food, and first autumn Reed Bunting in song, with an additional comment by one of the editors on feeding associations between male and juvenile birds.

A reader may well ask, "why bother?" Some may even suggest that writing short notes runs counter to the recent trend of promoting long-term studies (e.g. Wiens 1984). I have personally

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advocated the long-term approach frequently, and my own Ph.D. thesis on Blue Grouse constituted a contribution to a much longer term study of this species. However, short behavioural notes also have a role to play in ornithological literature, with three main functions: they supply information that might otherwise never appear in print; they contribute data to show general patterns; and they correct or modify previously accepted views or dogma. In the following paragraphs, I shall use a few examples to illustrate each of these roles.

In preparing her classic studies on Song Sparrows for publication, Nice (1937, 1943) relied extensively on short notes to compile information on many aspects of the life history of this very common and frequently studied bird. When I investigated a much less studied species, Forster's Tern (McNicholl 1971), I found that most previous information was either in short observational notes or buried in distributional notes. Moreover, when Nice turned to comparing Song Sparrows to other sparrows, other passerines, or birds in general, and when I wanted to compare Forster's Terns with other terns or larids, we both found that the bulk of information for most species was available only in the form of

short observational notes. A glance through accounts of both common and rare species in Bent's series on life histories of North American birds or through more recent compilations will show a similar dearth of information on many aspects of bird biology unless they have appeared somewhere in a short note. The reason for this is simply that birds are highly mobile creatures that often dash about in and out of sight before the observer can follow a sequence of events from start to finish. Also, they are in many cases adaptable creatures that respond differentially to different situations and/or places.

Filling information gaps on a particular species is of interest in itself, but takes on greater significance when some biologist tries to look at a broader picture, reviewing a behavioural pattern, anatomical feature, etc. in some bird family, order or other taxonomic level. For example, Friedmann (1929, 1963, 1971 and other papers) relied heavily on short notes in compiling lists of hosts and host reactions to various cowbird species. Each of his compilations in turn stimulated additional notes or comments that contributed to the next review. Explanations for some behaviour patterns and anatomical features are poorly described and little understood, and

reviewers rely again on material that often appears only in brief notes. A review of the occurrence and timing of egg-teeth in birds (Clark 1961) that was based on a combination of the author's examination of specimens and published notes stimulated considerable response (Parkes and Clark 1964) and also additional analysis. Jehl (1968) was stimulated to examine bill shape of shorebirds in relation to presence or absence of egg-teeth on the lower mandible. His finding that these structures were present on species that hatched with elongated bills but not those in which the upper mandible overhung the lower, led to his conclusion that the lower mandible egg-tooth functioned primarily in protection from abrasion, and also to a similar analysis for alcids (Sealy 1970), with similar conclusions. This series of reviews and reinterpretation would have been hampered or impossible without many of the short notes on which they were based.

Like all sciences, dogmatic "truisms" sometimes creep into ornithology. Readers of *Ontario Birds* will be familiar with many examples of "safe" identification features which turn out to be less reliable than once thought. Similarly, views on particular behaviour patterns can become entrenched. Comments in a paper by Sauer and Sauer (1967) as to why birds may not yawn became dogma. However those comments stimulated Harrison (1968) to publish a brief note on a captive Greenfinch that clearly differentiated yawning from bill stretching.

Similar notes help sort out truth from long-held assumptions.

Short observational notes, then, are important in filling in data gaps, in supplying the building blocks for review topics, and in dispelling myths. This does not mean, however, that all observations should be rushed into print. We all know that waxwings eat berries. Parkes (1969) commented that ornithologists seem to have a "compulsion to place every albino or white-spotted bird on record," and placed birds with crossed mandibles as a close second in over documentation. This does not mean that nobody should ever again write papers on albinism, crossed mandibles, or waxwings eating berries, but rather that some selectivity is required in what is worth publishing. Waxwings may eat certain berries more than others or more in one place than another, and some birds may be more susceptible to crossed bills than other species or populations (see Tweit *et al.* 1983). New information on well known phenomena still provides new insights.

How then, does an observer decide whether an observation is significant? The answer is neither simple nor precise; merely that one must go through the same sort of literature review that would be necessary for a longer paper. The Bent series, though dated, provides a good starting point for any North American species, and there are numerous more recent books on various families or orders on a World or North American scale. General topics can be researched through general ornithology texts

or the journal literature. The bird dictionary (Thomson 1964) is probably the single most comprehensive source. There are also a growing number of bibliographies and review volumes that can help those willing to put in the effort. If you are completely at a loss as to where to look, write or call someone who knows the literature for a few general leads.

Finally, one must always keep in mind that appearances can be deceiving. Some species may seem to be seldom parasitized by cowbirds not because cowbirds do not lay in their nests, but because their eggs roll out of the nest (McNicholl 1968) or are actively rejected by the intended host (Rothstein 1971). Newly hatched birds may appear to have no lower mandible egg-tooth because they lose it very early (McNicholl 1981).

I hope this essay stimulates readers to consider placing their observations on record, after suitable research in the library and reflection on the observation. Even if your efforts suggest that what you saw was in fact already well known for the species in question, the exercise will result in your knowing the species better and help sharpen your observational skills.

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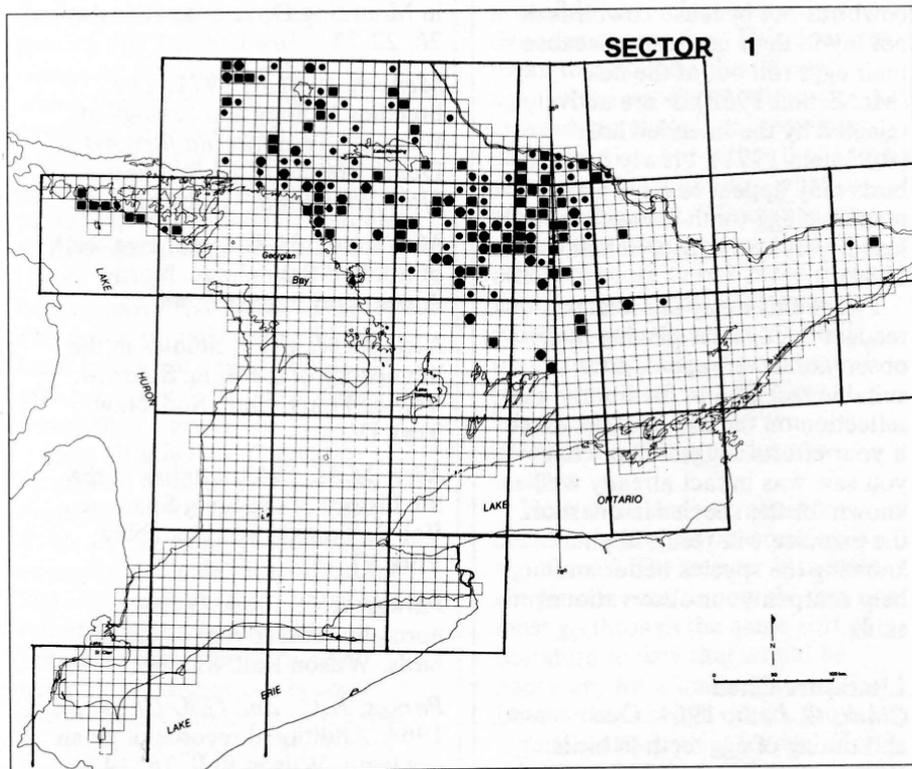
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Atlas Mystery Map



Guesses to last issue's Mystery Map included House Finch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Acadian Flycatcher. Only one person, Jim Richards, Orono, correctly guessed Orchard Oriole. Guesses for this issue's Mystery Map (above) are due immediately.

Mike Cadman, 355 Lesmill Rd., Don Mills Ontario M3B 2W8