

ONTARIO BIRDS

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N SHAW '86...



Ontario Birds

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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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Letters to the Editor

OBRC guidelines questioned

A questionable element in the evaluation policy of the Ontario Bird Records Committee was evidently highlighted in the interesting article by B. Di Labio and J. Bouvier in your last issue (*Ontario Birds* 4:19-21, 1986). In their report of the first confirmed record of Atlantic Puffin for Ontario, they point out that the 1881 record from Ottawa is suspect, in part, because "... the specimen was apparently never examined by an ornithological curator of a major institutional collection. . .", and that this contravened a requirement of the OBRC in such cases. Should we be surprised, however, that it was not examined by such a person back then? I'm not, since I can't think of *one* ornithological curator anywhere in Canada at that time or for quite a few years to come. John Macoun was only brought to Ottawa as the first government 'naturalist' in 1882 and it wasn't until he retired in 1911 that Percy Taverner was hired as the *first* federal government ornithologist. I don't believe that the situation was much more advanced than that elsewhere in Ontario and/or Canada. Do we then dismiss all records based on now-missing specimens because they were 'only' examined by the likes of J.H. Fleming, W.E. Saunders, G.R. White, etc.? Conversely, will any such cases today be accepted in the future just because someone with

the title of curator of an ornithological collection examined them? I doubt that our descendents will be so automatically trusting on the basis of a job title.

Surely the point here is that some record of a qualified ornithologist of standing having examined the specimen should be quite satisfactory. Nothing in this world is 100% but that should be acceptably close. In the case of the Ottawa River record of Puffin in 1881, I'll happily throw in my lot with the likes of John Macoun, Percy Taverner, W.E. Godfrey and the A.O.U. Checklist Committee—all of whom accept White's original identification.

Dan Brunton
Ottawa, Ontario

Reply to Dan Brunton

Mr. Brunton has apparently not read the guidelines which he has criticized. The section which he finds questionable, and cited inappropriately in the Di Labio-Bouvier article, deals with *Specimens Missing from Major Institutional Collections* where no written description or photograph exists. Is evidence of prior examination by the ornithological curator responsible for the collection then so unreasonable? The White Collection, where the 1881 puffin apparently resided, obviously was not that of a major institution. For specimens in such private collections the OBRC guidelines call for a complete

description or photograph, which applies to both missing *and* extant specimens.

However, the guidelines are not inflexible, and where justified by unusual circumstances, alternate treatments may well be applied. Regardless of the treatment, for all records reviewed by the OBRC, it must first be established that the record does in fact pertain to Ontario, and to gain acceptance, there must be proof of correct identification. Perhaps, for records such as the 1881 puffin, the OBRC should accept the opinion of a qualified, contemporary expert as proof of correct identification. But, for the 1881 puffin, nothing of substance exists. The specimen has been missing since at least 1923, a description apparently does not exist, the collection data are obscure, and it cannot be established if someone qualified ever examined it. (Our apologies, but G.R. White, W.H. Scott and E.G. White, in whom Mr. Brunton has placed so much faith, are unknown to us). These are the reasons why the OBRC cannot consider this record.

A number of possibilities exist which are not ruled out by the limited evidence available. The specimen may have been collected on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River; the bird, being an immature, could have been a species of puffin other than Atlantic; worse yet, the collection data may have been falsified (as has been shown for old, supposedly Ontario specimens of Snowy Plover).

Of course, Mr. Brunton—or anyone else—is at liberty to believe the correctness of the 1881 puffin record and cite it in literature is so desired. However, the OBRC cannot add a species to the official Ontario checklist based on such slim evidence, just as we cannot accept a modern record based on someone stating “I saw a Reddish Egret yesterday”, without providing a written description, photograph or specimen to support such a claim. Based on the criteria advanced by Mr. Brunton, Carbonated Warbler (Audubon) should be placed on the checklist for Kentucky, and Small-headed Warbler (Wilson, Audubon) should be added to the lists for Kentucky and New Jersey!

The main purpose of the OBRC is to bring about a high standard of documentation of rare bird occurrences, and to place the received material on permanent file for the benefit of future researchers. We hope the above comments answer the questions that have been raised.

Dennis Rupert
Chairman, OBRC

Alan Wormington
Secretary, OBRC