What Constitutes a Valid Rare Bird Record?

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In the not too distant past, the addition of new bird species to a state list was a matter of interest to only a few individuals. Verification of such records usually required a specimen which was deposited in a museum collection. Today, scores of birders in every state have an interest in bird distribution records. While specimens still constitute valid scientific records, they are not the only records that are acceptable today. Indeed, when considering the declining populations of some species, the aesthetic and educational value of observing the living bird, and the role of public opinion in shaping our laws and permit regulations, a collected specimen may not be the "best" record. The acceptance of other than specimen records by the scientific community has come about as a result of the interaction of a number of scientific, cultural, and political factors. Foremost among these are the following five: (1) changed research interests among professional ornithologists, (2) increased recognition of the important role of amateurs in furthering our knowledge of birds, (3) increased legal restrictions on bird collecting, (4) increased knowledge of the North American avifauna and decreased interest in "subspecies," with a concomitant decrease in availability of new records to be obtained, and (5) increased availability of inexpensive, quality photographic equipment - primarily the 35 mm single lens reflex and associated telephoto lenses.

The contribution of amateurs to the development of American ornithology has been subtantial, but at the same time, professional ornithologists have made reciprocal contributions to the popularizing of bird-watching. That is, it has been a two-way street - amateurs and professionals - the science and the avocation of ornithology have grown in stature as a result of association. This relationship has resulted from an exchange in trust. To foster the further growth of bird study, we must maintain this trust. The professional should not collect when collecting is not necessary; he should be willing to present occasional garden club and school programs on birds; he should be willing to assist the amateur in developing identification skills. In turn, the amateur should recognize that collecting of specimens does play a role in furthering our knowledge of birds, and he should be willing to meet rigorous standards to have his bird records accepted.

What constitutes a valid rare bird record today? Specimens and good photographs are nearly of equal acceptability. Good sound recordings may rank next. Sight records vary in their acceptability depending on who the observer was, what previous experience the observer had with the species, how many additional observers saw the bird, what kind of bird it was, where it was, how long it was observed, when it was seen, and what the viewing conditions were. Sight records place a poor fourth in terms of scientific

credibility when compared with specimens, photographs, or sound recordings. In the following paragraphs I will comment briefly on the nature of these types of records and how the amateur can best contribute to our knowledge of bird distribution.

Specimen records.--A specimen record that adequately documents the occurrence of a species in an area usually is a whole bird that is prepared as a study skin, but other types of specimen records may also be suitable. A single feather might be sufficient documentation for some birds. A skeleton, infertile egg, nest taken after young have fledged, or other physical evidence of the bird's presence can be worthy documentation.

Some important records have been established by specimens of birds that have been hit by cars, or that have flown into windows, TV towers, etc. For example, the first record of a Red Crossbill (Loxia curvirostra) in Mississippi was of a bird that had been hit by a car. Distribution records of some game birds have frequently been documented by specimens obtained by hunters during hunting season. The King Eider (Somateria spectabilis) was added to the Mississippi checklist as a result of such a specimen. Except for game birds obtained under the authority of a valid hunting license, special Federal and State permits are usually required before one can collect or possess any type of bird specimen. All non-game bird specimens ultimately have to be deposited in a scientific or educational institution.

If you find a dead bird of unusual significance, plug its mouth and any wounds with cotton or tissue. Smooth the feathers into lifelike position. Then wrap the bird carefully in paper, place it in a plastic bag, seal it, and freeze it until it can be delivered to an appropriate specimen collection.

Photographic records.--Photographic records have become increasingly in vogue and have numerous advantages over specimen records. They can be obtained by almost anyone, anytime, and anywhere, without need for a permit. Getting the record presents no danger to people or property, and these records leave the bird free to challenge other birders. The obvious disadvantage is that a physical specimen is not available for measuring and comparing with other specimens. The prevalence of bird banders in most parts of the country, however, allows the possibility that, with special effort, the rare bird might be trapped, banded, photographed, and measured for the record. Mississippi's first Snow Bunting (Plectrophenax nivalis) record came about in precisely this manner. I should make special note here that for firm establishment of the "record," the photograph is very important.

Unless the bird is "in the hand" or for some reason can be approached very closely, some sort of telephoto lens is usually needed. The most popular camera-lens combination is a 35 mm single lens reflex with a 400 mm telephoto lens. Smaller lenses simply do not "bring the bird

up close enough" for quality photographs unless the bird is particularly cooperative or you have time to entice the bird close to a photographic blind. Larger lenses (e.g., 600 mm) often require so much light that good photos can be obtained only on sunny days in open habitat. Larger lenses also are more difficult to work with because of the necessity for a firmer tripod mounting. Of course quality lenses are available in focal lengths of 600 mm or more and some fine bird photographs can be made with them. In terms of expense and versatility, however, my preference is the 400 mm lens.

To establish a record for a rare or unusual species, photographic quality, while desireable, is not necessary, as long as the bird can be clearly identified in the photograph. It is worth trying to photograph such a bird with the simplest of box cameras if nothing else is available. A few years ago a dog trainer in Louisiana photographed an Ivory-billed Woodpecker (Campephilus principalis) with a simple "instamatic" camera - and the bird is clearly identifiable in the pictures. Unfortunately, those photographs may be too good. The bird did not flinch as its picture was being taken and some have suggested that the photos might be a hoax - pictures of a stuffed bird that was hung on a tree. Oh for a lousy picture of that bird taken just as it was turning its head or flicking its wings or even blinking! If you have a rare bird located and you do not have the photographic equipment to capture the record, don't forget that your local newspaper probably has a professional photographer with the equipment and the skill to use it. If you approach him with an air of excitement and tale of the scientific importance and newsworthiness of documenting the record, you might find a helpful and interested friend.

What film should you use? If possible, take photographs with both black-and-white and color film. Most publications can only afford to publish black-and-white photographs and black-and-white prints made from color slides or negatives are generally of poor quality. On the other hand, only with color film can you document distinctive color features of the bird. I personally prefer slower, finer-grained films such as Kodak's Plus-X for black-and-white, and Kodak's Kodachrome 25 for color slides. These produce sharper pictures under good light conditions. In poor light, however, faster films must be used.

Sound records.--A tape-recording of bird sounds can be as firm a scientific record as a photograph. In the past rather expensive, complicated equipment was needed in order to record bird sounds. Today, as with photographic equipment, portable tape-recorders, sound parabolas, and directional microphones are readily available and are being used by amateurs as well as by professionals. Increasing interest in bird vocalizations has paralleled the development of technology to record and analyze the sounds. Today sound laboratories, such as one at the Florida State Museum in Gainesville, are collecting bird songs much as the ornithologists of an earlier generation collected bird skins. Sound recordings that document important bird records should be deposited in such a collection.

Sight records.--Here we are at the crux of many a controversy between the excited amateur with a new discovery and the professional who says "prove it." When is a sight record not a valid record? When it is not well documented. Even the most experienced birder makes mistakes in identifying birds. A fleeting glance of a rare bird is not worth much unless several persons saw it and independently identified it. Even a good long look by several persons can result in mistaken identification as a result of the power of suggestion. I will never forget a Christmas Bird Count that I participated in on which a member of my party spotted a Turkey across a field. It was overcast and late afternoon, but one-by-one five of us took a peek through a 20 X spotting scope and saw the gobbler's head and back raised just above the weeds. Everyone agreed on the identification and all were excited. In hopes of flushing more from the stubble, two of us set out across the field - only to find an oddly shaped stump with a broken branch propped against it!

"But," you say "my bird was not a stick-bird! It was a living flying whatchamacallit and I saw it very well and I know that's what it was! How dare you question my record!"

Perhaps you did see a whatchamacallit. The problem is that if all of the records that people were "sure" of were accepted without question, a lot of mistakes would be made. You may be sure and you may be absolutely right, but no one else can be certain without some sort of documentation. Ornithology is not an exact science like physics, but as scientists, ornithologists strive for accuracy. Without accuracy our knowledge of birds becomes a guessing game. Documentation of important records is as much a requirement for the professional as it is for the amateur. Without it the ornithologist loses credibility. If you present a record of a rare bird to the scientific community, be prepared to support it in scientific fashion.

Most state organizations require a specimen or a photograph of a new bird before the bird can be officially placed on the state list. Reported sightings of new birds that have not been so verified usually result in the addition of that species to the "hypothetical" list for the state. Multiple sightings of the species by multiple observers are sometimes accepted in lieu of other records as sufficient documentation for "listing" the bird. The Red-throated Loon (Gavia stellata) is considered worthy of listing in Alabama as a result of such repeated sightings (T. Imhof, pers. comm.).

If your rare records are not going to be accepted when you know very well what you saw, is it not a waste of time to report them? Emphatically no! One brick doesn't make a wall. But brick upon brick added to it makes the wall begin to take shape. Your "bricks" can be very important. Lay them firmly. If the only record you can get of a rare bird is your observation, make the most of it. Spread the word. The more people who see it the better. Describe everything you see as precisely as possible.

Where was the bird? What kind of habitat? What was it doing? How long did you observe it? Who else saw it? What were the viewing conditions? How far away was it? What were distinctive features of its plumage? Could you see eye color? Bill color? Leg color? Wing bars? Markings in the tail? On the crown? Through the eye? How did it fly? Were there other birds near it? If so, how did the unusual bird compare in size, shape, and behavior?

Answers to these and other questions can ultimately assist you in proving to yourself and others that you saw what you thought you did. Note these things immediately - preferably you should write them down or at least say them aloud to your companions as you are making the observations - and before you begin to dig into the text of your field guide for "help" in describing your bird. Do not wait until you return home to begin making a record of your sighting. Before long what you thought you saw and what your field guide describes begin to merge. It happens to the best of us. It is a bad sign if you were not certain of the identification when you saw the bird but became more and more convinced as time passed. If you were not convinced immediately and remained convinced, there is a good chance you have made a mistake. In the end, if there has never been any doubt in your mind about the identification, copy the details from your field notes and submit them along with any other documentation to your state journal. Even if the record is not published, it will generally become part of the permanent file and could be the first brick in a new wall.