

Why We Couldn't Accept Your Rare Species Report
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After serving for five years on the committee that evaluates documentations of rare and extraordinary occurrences for the Ohio Cardinal, I have become convinced that this article is badly needed. It is needed because I suspect (but cannot prove) that most of the extraordinary sight records rejected by the committee are in fact accurate; they are rejected because the documentation is either (a) so sloppily written as to be unreadable, (b) too incomplete to rule out other possibilities, or (c) internally inconsistent. There are other reasons why this article is needed, but first a discussion of the problems listed above:

(a) Sloppy/unreadable reports: The solution here is obvious; type them if at all possible. Contributors should be aware that the quality of the photocopies provided to the records committee by the editor are often of poor quality, apparently because at the editor's place of employment the photocopiers are lousy (can you do anything about this, Tom?). So if you must write your reports by hand, use a dark pen and "press firmly", keeping in mind that what the committee sees may be much fainter than the original. Also, don't use the margins. Writing that goes all the way to the margins may be cut off on our copies.

(b) Incomplete descriptions: This is the commonest reason for rejection. Item 6, in which the size, shape, plumage, etc. are to be "described in great detail", and Item 10, which asks you to eliminate similar species, are the most crucial parts of the form in regards to this problem. Examples of inadequate descriptions:

- "The bird was good-sized" (Tell how big it actually appeared to be by comparing it to a well-known bird; e.g. "it was about the size of a mallard", etc.).
- "...shape of a vulture but flight style was different" (Tell in what way it was different; e.g. "Vulture-shaped but flew with faster and more frequent wing beats..." etc.).

Many rejections of type (b) occur because descriptions don't begin with the general before going to the specific. For example, to report a Merlin the observer must first establish that the bird was a raptor and then a falcon and not, say, an accipiter; it is only after establishing those facts that one should present evidence to distinguish the Merlin from other falcons. Reporting a "gray-backed hawk bigger than a Kestrel with a streaked breast and a long tail with black and gray bands" will earn a rejection because it doesn't rule out Sharp-shinned or even a small Cooper's Hawk.

Many incomplete reports occur because you are a good birder and assume that *we assume* you are a good birder; therefore you don't feel you have to prove that the bird you saw was a falcon and not an accipiter before going straight to the details of telling one falcon from another. DON'T ASSUME THIS. We get reports from people with all degrees of experience, and cannot invoke a double standard for the people we know to be experts. I hope the reasons for this are obvious!

(c) Internally inconsistent documentations. These are the ones that give us fits. Someone identifies an immature gull or a jaeger to species, reporting in detail all the salient field marks in the field guides. Yet careful examination of the form reveals that the bird was seen flying past at a distance of several hundred yards; it is highly unlikely the observer could have seen all the things he/she claims to have seen, even through a spotting scope. In such instances we prefer to believe in the observer's basic honesty, but realize from

personal experience that sometimes the eyes see what the mind wants them to see, especially if the conditions are such that you can't quite be sure of the pattern of markings on the wing coverts of that immature gull 'way out on the water. Of course, a percentage of these ID's are indeed accurate, but which ones?

That brings me to my other reason for writing this note. I have become thoroughly disenchanted with the competitive aspect of birding. I have come to believe that problems of type (c) most often result from the competitive nature of our avocation. The birder who insists on giving a species name to every bird he sees, however fleetingly and unsatisfactorily, is like a car without brakes. The truth is that some species identifications CANNOT BE MADE WITH ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY IN THE FIELD. This is probably true of some immature gulls in worn or aberrant plumage, many non-singing *Empidonax* flycatchers, some female hummingbirds, some tropical *Chaetura* swifts, and others. In many more cases (gulls, jaegers, swifts, etc.) identification is possible but only under rare and extremely favorable circumstances. One has to be willing/able to write down "unidentified gull" and live with it!

Extreme competitiveness among birders allows egos to run rampant. Some egos are crushed, while others become grossly inflated. This in turn creates a breeding ground for all sorts of difficulties, all of which work against our attempt to produce in these pages a useful and cautiously accurate record of the real distributions and abundances of rare birds in this region. Rejections by the records committee are taken personally (they certainly aren't intended that way, but we can only work with the documentations you send us!), and as a result some excellent birders no longer submit their records. This sets all of us back, because the one thing that we all want is to have open lines of communication on the subject of what birds occur, when and where--- if possible, all gathered in one accessible state publication.

Serving on a committee of this type is a difficult and thankless job. If you accept someone's sight record you are merely confirming what they are already sure of. If you reject it, you've bruised an ego or made someone hopping mad. This is not the way to meet new friends in the birding fraternity, but it can sure make you enemies in a hurry! We even have to pass judgment on one another's rare sightings, and there have been a few instances of committee members having their own documentations rejected by the other members. Everyone has misidentified birds at one time or another, including the experts. More frequently, all of us may write a documentation that is not all it should be.

The Cardinal has taken giant steps forward in the past year. The format is excellent and its punctuality is a breath of fresh air when compared to almost any other publication of its type (compare American Birds, for example). Tom Kemp and his staff deserve a great deal of credit for this. With fuller participation, appropriate caution in the field and care in preparing the documentations, we can create in the Cardinal a truly outstanding state bird journal. Let's pull together to make it happen.