

# On Correct Identification

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It sometimes seems to me that the only person fully qualified to comment on that which gives sight records full validity is the confirmed collector of specimens who has had the experience of identifying a living bird in the field to his complete satisfaction, then of collecting that very bird only to find it *not to be* of the species he had been sure it was.

Three times I have had that experience—first at Churchill, Manitoba, along the west coast of Hudson Bay in the summer of 1931, when I crawled across a mudflat on a very foggy day stalking what I felt sure was a Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) only to find, after I'd collected the bird, that it was a Stilt Sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*) in full breeding feather. In heavy fog the bird had appeared to be three times its actual size. That's how fog can affect visibility.

Again, in the northern panhandle of West Virginia, I collected what I felt sure was an adult male Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*), a species that had never been reported from that area, and picked up a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*), a common species there. The sky was clear and very blue that day. The feathers of the catbird's back had reflected that blue and the bird died because I, convinced that the blueness was that of a Blue Grosbeak, and mindful that I had many times failed to obtain an important specimen as a result of too much deliberation, did not check one very important point—the looks of the bird's bill. Many a reader will say: What nonsense! Nobody'd ever mistake a catbird for a grosbeak! To which I reply: That's exactly what I did. I wanted very much to obtain a Blue Grosbeak. And the reflected blueness tipped the scales in favor of my calling the catbird a grosbeak. It was as simple as that; and the point of this particular discussion is that what happened *happened to me, a veteran*.

Again, in central Oklahoma, this time on 13 September 1954, along the east edge of Norman, I collected what I'd identified as a Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*), at that time a species that had never been taken in Oklahoma. I had noted the strongly yellowish tone of the flanks and the rather warm tone on the chest and was confident that the bird was a Philadelphia, this despite the fact that I'd heard a Warbling Vireo (*V. gilvus*) singing more than once that morning in that very area. When I picked the specimen up I saw at once that it was a Warbling Vireo. Its chest was pale buffy, not yellow. For a moment I toyed with the idea that I'd seen one bird and shot another; then I knew that I'd simply misidentified the bird while it was alive.

So nowadays when someone tells me that what he saw was surely a raven (*Corvus corax*) because it was "so much larger" than a crow (*C. brachyrhynchos*), or a Great-tailed-Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) because it was "a whole lot bigger" than a Common Grackle (*Q. quiscula*), the first question I ask is this: Was the day foggy? Or, if the moot bird was supposedly a Philadelphia Vireo, I insist on ascertaining that the color of the underparts was the right sort of light, clear yellow and that this color extended throughout the whole of the throat and breast, before I feel sure that the bird was not a Warbling Vireo.

Most bird students are honest; but I have reason to suspect that many of those who dedicate their efforts primarily to building up a "life list" tend to be content with identifications that are not entirely satisfactory. Especially is this true when the "life lister" knows that the locality and season are right for the species he is determined to see. After all, he may have travelled across a continent just to see that particular species.

Here in Cleveland County, Oklahoma, those of us who have worked, really worked, with the birds of the area know that Smith's Longspur (*Calcarius pictus*) is a fairly regular winter resident. We know about when it arrives and about when it departs. We know from specimens carefully collected and examined that the molt into handsome breeding feather does not start while the species is here. We know about where to look for the birds, for they seem to be attracted winter after winter to certain largely treeless fields.

How many of us know just what to look for in identifying Smith's Longspur—the boldly black-and-white lesser and middle wing coverts in adult males (a feature that can be seen clearly on a bright day as the birds fly past), the strongly buffy tone of the underparts in both sexes, the diagnostic tail pattern? Showing visitors from afar some flying longspurs and announcing that "they could be Smith's Longspurs" is not enough. Falling back on the well documented statement that all four longspurs are known to occur here in winter is not enough. The truly scientific "life lister" will have in mind just what characters to look for and also exactly what the analogous characters are in similar species before he calls his sight record completely valid.

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