

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

The "Changing Seasons" is often the most interesting section of *American Birds*, and the recent one by Don Roberson (September-October 1984) was no exception. Although I agree with many of his ideas, I feel that some of his statements need to be expanded on.

Roberson contends that rare bird occurrences documented by written descriptions "require the vote of a properly organized and well-respected rarities committee to afford that sighting the authentication that science requires." He adds that "specimens and committee-accepted sight records . . . serve equally well to authenticate a record." These statements fail to stress the fundamental difference that exists between the evidence (specimens, recordings, photographs, written descriptions, etc.) that documents bird occurrences on the one hand, and the evaluation that anyone can make of such evidence on the other hand.

The vote of a committee does not add any evidence to what is already available. When the 1957 A.O.U. Check-list committee voted to include the Point Barrow Willow Warbler on the list of North American birds, that decision was not a touch of the wand that authenticated the record. Roberson re-examined that specimen and what he brought to light was not a mere opinion, but the evidence that pointed to an Arctic Warbler. The vote of a rarities committee reviewing written descriptions is not and should not be considered as the evidence that documents ("authenticates") bird occurrences. Science requires facts, not opinions. Anyone interested in bird distribution should concern himself with the evidence available (specimens, written descriptions, etc.), and not the decisions of others.

It goes without saying that rarities committees make a highly valuable contribution to the gathering of distributional data; but this contribution is to be found in their background research and curatorial work (the storing, listing, and publication of written descriptions), not in the "labels" they attach to these descriptions.

Sincerely,
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To the Editor:

In a recent issue of this journal, my article entitled "Western Gull in Alabama and northwest Florida (AB 36: 899-902, September 1982) was termed "regrettable" by Thomas Imhof (AB 38: 922) and "very unfortunately and prematurely published" by Don Roberson (AB 38: 878). Since my paper has never been properly refuted and since these comments by Imhof and Roberson have been both unspecific and harsh, many readers are understandably confused by the situation concerning "Old One Foot," as this gull has come to be known.

Both Imhof and Roberson are clearly entitled to their own opinions, but a distinction must be made between opinion and the proper refutation of a refereed article. The identification of "Old One Foot" as a Western Gull was based on more than two years of research and correspondence with widely recognized gull experts in three countries. Any claim that the identification was incorrect should, at the very best, address the field characteristics I described as being absent (not correct for "Old One Foot"), wrong (not characteristic of the Western Gull), or inconclusive (characteristic of other species or hybrids as well). The question of how this gull arrived on the northwest coast of the Gulf of Mexico is intriguing, but is secondary to its identification. Imhof has for some time relied on the improbability of a Western Gull reaching Alabama as eliminating this species. However, the existence of a specimen record of this species in Chicago clearly demonstrates that the Western Gull is not absolutely impossible away from the Pacific coast.

Imhof has most recently claimed that this bird is likely a hybrid between a Lesser Black-backed Gull and either a Great Black-backed Gull or a Herring Gull. He suggests that since Lesser Black-backed Gulls are "pioneering" and "thinly scattered" they will produce hybrids with other *Larus* gulls in the absence of potential mates of their own species. This notion, too, is intriguing and would have important consequences for gull systematics. It should be supported with data that show that Lesser Black-backed Gulls breed or interbreed anywhere in the Americas. Comparison with specimens of Lesser Black-backed Gull

hybrids should also be presented.

Our overriding concern should be the correct identification of "Old One Foot." Having never been refuted (and, to my mind, having no serious shortcomings), the analysis of this bird's characters as fitting the Western Gull still stands. New evidence, or a new analysis of existing evidence, should be submitted with full details for review by knowledgeable referees before it can be considered as more than mere conjecture.

Sincerely,
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To the Editor:

In "The Changing Seasons" for September-October 1984, Don Roberson claims that 200-300 Western Reef-Herons, *Egretta gularis*, were imported into Austria and Germany from Pakistan in 1980-82 and cites *American Birds* 37:1032 as his authority. *American Birds* 37:1032 contains a summarized translation of a short note appearing in a German bird magazine (Wüst, W., 1983 *Küstenreihher (Egretta gularis schistacea) aus Pakistan nach Mittelfranken Importiert. Orn. Mitt.* 35:132-133). The original note states that its author learned from a reliable source (sic) that a dealer near Frankfurt imported 300 reef-herons from Pakistan in 1981 and 200 more in 1982 for resale to "fanciers" in Germany and Austria. Wüst assumes the dates were misstated, or others were imported earlier, citing three published Central European reef-heron records during 1980 as evidence.

Since the image of several hundred pet reef-herons gracing Bavarian duck ponds seemed a little fishy to me, in late 1984 I contacted Tim Inskipp of the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit of the IUCN (UK). He is a widely respected authority on the world bird trade, particularly that originating on the Indian subcontinent. Inskipp did not know of the Wüst note and knew of no market for herons in Europe or anywhere else; like me, he had trouble imagining one. He added that Pakistan had not allowed legal bird ex-

ports for years, which implied to me that the country probably lacked the infrastructure necessary to capture, transport, care for and export herons by the hundreds. India, which exported about 14.8 million birds between 1970 and 1980, before its traffic was largely halted, exported few herons and no reef-herons during that period (Inskipp, T. 1983. The Indian Bird Trade. *WTMU Traffic Bull.* 5:26-46).

In short, while reef-herons may have been imported into Central Europe, the account published in *American Birds* 37:1032 and cited by Roberson appears to fall within the class of unverified reports, not authenticated records.

Sincerely,
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ANNOUNCEMENTS

NORTHEASTERN BIRD-BANDING ASSOCIATION RESEARCH GRANT

The E. Alexander Bergstrom Memorial Research Fund of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association, Inc., promotes research on birds. Small grants, usually not exceeding \$200, are available to cover expenses (but not salaries or overhead charges to institutions). Details and application forms may be obtained from Dr. Valerie M. Freer, Chairman, NEBBA Research Committee, Science Department, Sullivan County Community College, Loch Sheldrake, New York 12759. Deadline for applications is February 15, 1986.

SIGURD T. OLSON COMMON LOON RESEARCH AWARD

Wisconsin Project Loon Watch is accepting applications for its first annual award for research on Common Loons in the Lake Superior-Lake Michigan region of the United States and Canada. To apply for the \$1000 award, a brief description (maximum 10 pp.) of the proposed research program and curriculum vitae should be submitted by the principal investigator to Dr. Paul I. V. Strong, Director, Wisconsin Project Loon Watch, Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin 54806, no later than March 1, 1986. Proposals by students should be accompanied by two letters of recommendation. The award will be granted on the basis of the project's potential to better understand and manage Upper Great Lakes populations of Common Loons.



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