
editor's notebook

In a conversation several years ago, a biology grad student took me to task for using the term field ornithology. "You and your friends are just compiling records of rare stray birds," he said. "That's not ornithology."

At the time I argued with him. Today I would probably shrug it off. There are trends and fashions in any pursuit, after all, and things go in and out of vogue. Poetry journals of today would probably reject the best work of Tennyson or Longfellow simply because their poems had strict meter and rhyme. In a parallel vein, many items published a century ago in the ornithological journal *The Auk* would need to be sharpened up to even qualify for *Field Notes* or *Birding* today.

It doesn't bother me that some scientists are bored by rare birds. I can point to a couple of prime examples to the contrary: Dr. Frank Gill, current president of the American Ornithologists' Union, or Dr. John Fitzpatrick, president-elect of that same organization. Each of these men has scientific credentials by the truckload. Each of them—believe me—has been observed going totally ape on spotting a rare bird, complete with shouting, jumping around, and punching their fists in the air. Proof enough, in my book, that rarities are at least interesting to some ornithologists.

But do they have any significance? When a bird shows up far from its normal range, does it mean anything? At one time, the stock answer was, "No." All such outlanders were once referred to as "accidentals," the implication being that such occurrences were pure accidents. If these records were indeed totally random events, then there was no point in studying them.

Actually, though, when we start to look at records of rarities, we discover that they reveal distinct patterns. In this issue of *Field Notes*, for example, Steven Mlodinow explores the status of the Tropical Kingbird north of the Mexican border. It makes a complicated picture: long established as a scarce breeder in Arizona; recently established as a scarce resident in Texas; far-flung stray everywhere else, from Alaska to Québec. So many such strays are on record that Mlodinow can now tell us, e.g., how many Tropical Kingbirds will show up in California in the typical autumn, and when, and where they probably came from, and which ones are likely to stay for the winter. Anything that can be predicted so well is clearly not a random phenomenon.

Increased fieldwork by thousands of birders is what has produced this level of understanding. When the first Tropical Kingbird for coastal Washington was found, in November 1916, there had been no other records anywhere else in the Pacific Northwest, and it would have seemed like an odd one-time occurrence. Now that more records have accumulated, that first kingbird fits right into a rare but regular movement of late fall birds up the coast. Such strays are few enough that they might be missed altogether by small numbers of observers, but with enough people out looking, such low-density patterns are clarified.

But what about those vagrants that—even with the current level of birding activity—remain truly rare? It's one thing to say that the ten Curlew Sandpipers this season were fewer than usual; but what

are we to make of a Brown Shrike in Nova Scotia, or a Brown-chested Martin in New Jersey? The like had never been seen before in those places, nor anywhere nearby. Are these occurrences random events? Are such strays so far off the wall that they do deserve to be called "accidental"?

Don't bet on it. Or at least, don't place any bets until you read what Michael Patten has to say about these birds, in his Changing Seasons column in this issue. Even if these particular records had no direct precedents, Patten finds worthwhile things to say about both. They fit into larger patterns involving major movements by major groups of birds.

Besides, I doubt that these records will remain unique for long—especially if the level of birding activity continues to increase. Even with the legions of birders in the field today, we have hardly achieved blanket coverage of North America yet. This is a big continent; I believe that the great majority of birds wandering about the United States and Canada are never seen by birders at all. Even when they are seen, some of the most surprising ones may not be identified. One of the past Brown Shrikes in California, for example, was first identified as a young Northern Shrike. And how many people look closely at dull-colored swallows? Now that more birders are aware of the existence of Brown-chested Martin, I am willing to bet there will be more records.

And when more records accumulate, they may well reveal more patterns. These patterns may teach us more about bird distribution, migration, and vagrancy, with rare occurrences helping to illuminate the facts about normal dispersal. This is not a trivial pursuit. Birding is fun, of course, and it can be practiced as just an exciting hobby and nothing more. But when we take the time to keep accurate records, to document our rare sightings, and to report the significant observations to *Field Notes*, we are contributing to a growing body of information. When we add to the total knowledge of bird distribution, there is no reason why we should not refer to this pursuit as field ornithology.

—KENN KAUFMAN
Editor