

EDITORS' NOTEBOOK

Avibase and other recent resources

From our colleague Denis Lepage (dlepage@bsc-eoc.org) at Bird Studies Canada, creator of a major new website on birds called Avibase:

"I'm excited to announce a new website called Avibase (<<http://www.bsc-eoc.org/avibase/avibase.jsp>>), which contains taxonomic and distributional information (including maps) for all ca. 10,000 extant species and 22,000 subspecies of birds in the world, as well as for several extinct and ancient fossil species. The site also offers search tools for Internet sites and images, as well as links to other sites such as 'ITIS' (Integrated Taxonomic Information Systems) and BirdLife International's 'Threatened Birds of the World' website.

"Avibase is the result of nearly 12 years of work on a database that now contains close to a million records, including 300,000 occurrence records and 180,000 synonyms in over a dozen languages. 'Bird Checklists of the World,' which offers bird checklists for over 500 countries and regions, has now also been integrated into Avibase and continues to be available directly from my other web site 'Bird Links to the World.'"

We also want to make mention here of two other resources. For those hunting down obscure information on the history of avian taxonomy and taxonomists, there is no better source on-line than Alan P. Peterson's "Zoonomen: Zoological Nomenclature Resource," at <<http://www.zoonomen.net>>, which has abundant links to authors of original descriptions.

Finally, the formidable "Birds of the World" CD-ROM set is now available (see <<http://www.birdsoftheworld.org>>), a database of 9970 species and 16,500 subspecies, 5118 distributional and 462 taxonomic maps, 14,500 photographs of 3870 species, with material in 18 languages and checklists for all the countries of the world. The authors and architects of this remarkable resource—Lars Larsson, Erling Larsson, and Göran Ekström—are to be commended for a very polished and useful product, one that is under continuous development.

On vagrancy & "rarities"

We were chagrined to hear, albeit second-hand, that a veteran observer and much-respected contributor to these pages had recently lamented that *North American Birds* has "gone over to rarities." This little phrase would seem to carry with it a number of

assumptions worth considering openly in this informal section. First, "gone over to" implies a failure of an ethical sort—to "go over to" rarities is to abandon the commoner species, perhaps even to drift away from bird conservation. Second, the idea that rarities constitute an embarrassing fixation of hobbyists or dilettantes or dabblers (rather than serious ornithologists, amateur or otherwise) is an old canard among foes of recreational birding. And third, the phrase suggests the journal has lost the value it once had.

We present this issue, whose articles focus on two different sorts of avian vagrancy in the East, as evidence that documentation of unexpected or extralimital species has value for the field of conservation. Our lead article, which showcases several western vagrants to Long Island, New York, not only elucidates some very little-known corners of bird identification—the difficult vireos and flycatchers mentioned in last issue's "Changing Seasons" essay—but also forges a clear connection between avian vagrancy and tick dissemination, a topic rarely considered by birders (even though many of us have contracted Lyme Disease!). As we read of the possible effects of West Nile Virus in several regions (see the S.A. in Illinois & Indiana Region), we should bear in mind that the spread of such diseases appears to have much to do with local and regional bird movements, many of which (for eastern corvids, for instance) are very poorly understood. Our second article, on the appearances of Brown-headed Nuthatch out of range, has several implications for bird conservation: it suggests that vagrancy can be a response to widespread habitat destruction for some species, but it also suggests that habitat creation, even in places well away from historical range, can support satellite populations of some species.

We suspect that the sense that the journal has "gone over to rarities" has to do with specific changes: not too long ago, this journal published standardized habitat surveys of breeding birds (1937–1984) and Christmas Bird Counts as separate issues and even featured interactive material to establish the "blue list" of declining species. It is true that these functions now fall to other offices and publications, and without them, this journal's more concentrated emphasis on changing bird distributions—especially changes that are pronounced, highly unusual, or widespread—could be interpreted as a focus on "rarities" per se.

But what are "rarities"? Most are birds

seen out of place or season, often well beyond even the fringe of normal range; others are unidentifiable birds, apparent hybrids, variants, or oddly-pigmented individuals. They are birds that stand out as different in our sense of what is normal for our region. Because this journal receives data that are essentially anecdotal (only a small fraction of sightings ever gets documented by photographs and extensive notes) and rarely standardized in any way, we do concentrate on bird records that are more manageable—flights of thousands of birds are more difficult to digest here than are flights of dozens. We see from our regional reports that there was a phenomenal flight of Cedar Waxwings and Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers into Central America and even the Caribbean in winter 2002–2003, but we have little in the way of useful data from these flights to say something more than superficial about them.

On the other hand, observers south of New England kept notes religiously on the late-winter and spring flight of Red-necked Grebes into their areas. Regional editors spent scores of hours digesting these numbers, and editors at *North American Birds* have spent scores more poring over what these numbers might mean (see the "Changing Seasons" essay herein). Likewise, the flight of whistling-ducks in late spring and summer was meticulously documented by many observers, and this makes it an object of closer reading than the flights of waxwings and warblers can be. Whatever the species, whatever its relative abundance in a given place or time, the journal attempts to provide as much context and analysis as is feasible within our production schedule.

Thus we do not see in these pages a failure of bird conservation. Instead, we see a useful digest of changing bird distribution across an enormous area; the raw material for the ever-refined range maps that appear in the best recent field guides and family monographs; and a clearinghouse for information about rapid declines and increases in bird species. Between the covers are surely a thousand kernels for fascinating ornithological field studies, not just on bird distribution but on population ecology, birds' responses to weather phenomena, migrational strategies, taxonomy, hybridization, and more.

On the verb "vagate"

This journal, in its unusual interstice between the worlds of birding and ornithology, occasionally prints a word that sticks in

the crow (not to say crop) of the gentle reader. The verb "vagate" is one such word. We get very little in the way of heated correspondence at the editorial desk, but we received four notes from readers to the effect that this word was an unacceptable neologism in a respectable journal. Months after we received these notes, Robb Hamilton, regional editor for the Baja California Peninsula, looked into the history of the word, with help of Los Angeles County Library reference librarian Tina Nance, and found it in the *Oxford English Dictionary (Unabridged)*. The word, in use for about two centuries now, means "to range or wander."

North American Birds and predecessors have been a common source of birding parlance for much of the twentieth century, and though the journal has been slow to embrace hip phrases from the culture of listing—"dip," "grip," "tick," and "twitch" for instance—it has usually maintained its nostalgic link with the English of amateur ornithologists of decades past. To call a first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake by its English name of "tarrock" or a female Ruff by its antiquated moniker "Reeve" has been allowable in this journal, even after such words have begun to fade from common use among North American field birders. South Polar Skuas spend their "contranuptial" months in our waters and are rare "visitants" to beaches. Even the word "vagrant" has usually been applied to wandering homeless people, rather than to birds, through most of its history.

Is there value in exercising uncommon words? Shouldn't all young gulls in their first winter simply be called "first-basic" birds? And isn't it sexist to utilize different names for male and female birds of a species? If this were strictly an ornithological journal, we would be more inclined to avoid the vernacular, whether old or new. But the journal's roots are in the amateur's exploration of bird distribution and identification, and for this reason, we encourage from our contributors the occasional sally beyond cool scientific writing. Most of American ornithology has known no strict boundary between scientific description and florid gush: think of the lapidary but warm writing of John James Audubon, John Bartram, Elliot Coues, William Beebe, Louis J. Halle, Aldo Leopold, or Robert Cushman Murphy.

Moreover, we all, as students of bird distribution, share a common interest in bird records of the near and distant past: who has not marveled to think of skies full of Passenger Pigeons? To understand fluctuations in the populations of bird species that are still with us, we necessarily plumb the depths of historical writing on birds in our area, and it is here that we encounter a vocabulary varied and rich. Although we can recreate neither the avifauna of times past nor the prose of its

chroniclers, we can still recall both in our occasional references that lie outside our present reality and discourse.

We do see this journal as one of "ornithological record," as the cover professes, but it is not solely one devoted to distributional ornithology. *North American Birds* allows expression of the human experience of exploring bird distribution as well. How each contributor expresses himself or herself within the guidelines set by the editors, by the Publisher, and by the American Birding Association will be as varied as the contributors themselves. And we hope that among the contributions of our 80 regional editors, everyone will find a line or two that delights.

Comings and goings

We welcome on board Todd Day as regional editor in the Middle Atlantic Region. Todd, a Massachusetts native, has spent over a decade in Virginia's and Maryland's birding haunts getting ready for the job. His Virginia "Big Year" in 2002 netted 346 species, the state's highest thus far. In the process, he covered the state from top to bottom (and offshore) and contributed much to our knowledge of modern mid-Atlantic bird distribution. We're delighted to have him working as regional editor, in the mighty big shoes of Fred Scott and Harry Armistead. Marshall Iliff, who helped compose this season's Baja Peninsula column, will continue to co-write the Middle Atlantic report from his new Pacific digs for the time being.

Corrigenda

We apologize to Kevin J. McGowan, longtime contributor to these pages, for miscrediting his excellent photograph of the Brown Pelican (*N.A.B.* 57: 35). In the subsequent issue, the hawk portrayed in the Middle Pacific Coast report (*N.A.B.* 57: 255) was not the Broad-winged Hawk reported from the San Luis N.W.R., California, but rather an immature Swainson's Hawk along the Santa Fe Grade on 12 January 2003, also a remarkable find at this location in winter (apologies to Les Chibana, the photographer). Apologies, too, are owed Bill Pranty, our Technical Reviewer, whose name should have followed Richard Paul's as second author in the last issue's article on the Elegant Tern nesting in Florida. Finally, Steve Howell points out that the caption for the Golden-crowned Kinglet from Llano Grande, Oaxaca, which claimed a first documented state record, was in error: Boucard took a specimen (USNM 148857) not far away at La Parada, Oaxaca, probably some time in the nineteenth century!

—Edward S. Brinkley, Editor

—Louis R. Bevier, Associate Editor

—Matthew F. Sharp, Photo Editor

STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE REGIONAL REPORTS

Abbreviations used in place names

In most regions, place names given in italic type are counties. Other abbreviations:

A.F.B.	Air Force Base
B.B.S.	Breeding Bird Survey
C.B.C.	Christmas Bird Count
Cr.	Creek
Ft.	Fort
Hwy	Highway
I.	Island or Isle
Is.	Islands or Isles
Jct.	Junction
km	kilometer(s)
L.	Lake
mi	mile (s)
Mt.	Mountain or Mount
Mts.	Mountains
N.F.	National Forest
N.M.	National Monument
N.P.	National Park
N.W.R.	National Wildlife Refuge
P.P.	Provincial Park
Pen.	Peninsula
Pt.	Point (not Port)
R.	River
Ref.	Refuge
Res.	Reservoir (not Reservation)
S.P.	State Park
Twp.	Township
W.M.A.	Wildlife Management Area
W.T.P.	(Waste) Water Treatment Pond(s) or Plant

Other abbreviations and symbols referring to birds:

ad. (ads.)	adult(s)
imm. (imms.)	immature (s)
juv. (juvs.)	juvenile; juvenile(s)
ph.	photographed
sp. (spp.)	species (plural)
subad. (subads.)	subadult(s)
tape	audio tape-recorded
vt.	videotaped
†	written details were submitted for a sighting
*	a specimen was collected