THE CHANGING SEASONS

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

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An Ornithological Parlor Game

What do the following records—let's refer to them as "Category L" records—have in common?

- 1 Manx Shearwater off Los Angeles, California
- 1000+ Turkey Vultures on Ohio Christmas Bird Counts
- 395 Bald Eagles along the Rappahanock River in Virginia
- 106 Sandhill Cranes on the Long Point, Ontario Christmas Bird Count
- 28 Eurasian Collared-Doves at Ballantine, Montana

Next, what do the following—we'll call them "Category S" records—have in common?

- 3 Roadside Hawks in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas
- 42 Northern Hawk Owls on the Sax–Zim, Minnesota, Christmas Bird Count
- 46 Red-headed Woodpeckers in New Jersey's Great Swamp
- 7 Townsend's Solitaires in New Brunswick
- 700+ Cedar Waxwings in and around San Salvador, El Salvador

Finally, what is the unifying theme for the following "Category Z" records?

- 1 Great Black-Hawk in Florida
- 1 Chuck-will's-widow in Ohio
- 1 White-striped Woodcreeper along the San Pedro River in far-northern Chihuahua
- 21 Northern Rough-winged Swallows in January in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- 1 American Dipper in Dallas, Texas

Collecting Stamps

Ernest Rutherford, discoverer of the atomic nucleus and purveyor of many a memorable one-liner, said, "All science is either physics or stamp collecting." And ever since Rutherford, biologists have been fighting that charge. The basic argument of the geneticists, evolutionists, taxonomists, and others is that *we too* look for patterns and process, that *we too* seek theoretical unification, that *we too* can see the big picture.

What about birders and ornithologists? Can we make sense out of all of the avian complexity, diversity, and beauty that surrounds us? Can we discern the context, the commonalities, in big-picture phenomena such as status and distribution, range expansions and contractions, population increases and decreases, and the like? Or are we guilty of stamp collecting? Of focusing narrowly and meaninglessly on isolated phenomena, viz., rarities?

What's the fun of birding, one might ask, without that one-in-a-million rarity? Well, there's a flip side to the question. What's the fun of an enterprise in which 999,999 out of a million observations are merely mundane, mere filler? Besides, it is the "ordinary" birds that are, in aggregate, doing the most exciting, the most intriguing things. It is the ordinary birds that make field ornithology truly thrilling. And even the "rarities," it turns out, have their place, their context. To be sure, the analysis that follows is a far cry from the physicist's dream of total unification. But we birders and ornithologists oughtn't lose heart. There are thousands of us, amassing millions of observations every year. Together, we can begin to discern the big picture. Together, we can discover beauty, across large spatial and temporal scales.

Category L

Perhaps the biggest myth of all is that, over the long haul, populations ought to be stable. That myth was "officially" debunked as early as Malthus and Darwin, but it persists. All populations have an inherent tendency toward natural *increase*. What goes up must come down, of course, and most populations of organisms exhibit sustained periods of *decline* as well. Sometimes, they even go extinct. In any event, long-term population stability is rare. That is a result borne out over and over again, both empirically and theoretically. Our expectation should be that *most* populations of North American birds are unstable and dynamic, increasing or decreasing.

How many records refer to Category L (for "Long-term") phenomena? A sampling follows.

At the top of the A.O.U. *Check-list*, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks are increasing in the southern United States, evidenced this past winter by single-location counts of 28 in South Carolina, 255 in Florida, and 1000+ in a crawdad-and-rice complex in Louisiana.

Range shifts are typically reported as single-species phenomena, but there is no ecological principle that constrains such phenomena to the species level. Consider the case of the North American Anseriformes (waterfowl). Most species of Anserinae (geese and swans) are undergoing dramatic range expansions and population increases, whereas other anseriform subfamilies are not. To be sure, proliferating populations of Anserinae were widely noted throughout the continent during the winter of 2004–2005. Pink-footed Geese are increasing in the Palearctic, and three were noted this winter in Nova Scotia. Good counts of Greater White-fronted Goose included 2665 at Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, Illinois and 3500 at Reelfoot Lake on the Kentucky–Tennessee border. Farther west, smaller—but still higher-than-average—numbers were noted in Colorado, and a good-sized flock of 133 passed over Palo Alto, California. Rapidly growing populations of Snow Goose are of increasing concern to wildlife biologists in North America. This winter, there were records from Ontario and North Dakota, well to the north of the traditional wintering range of the species. Farther south, single-location tallies included 200,000 in Illinois, 250,000 in Missouri, 100,000 along the Tennessee–Kentucky border, and exactly 1,161,608 in Nebraska. Wintering Ross's Geese are on the increase, with notable counts this past winter of 147 along the Kentucky–Tennessee border and 3000 in Humphreys County, Mississippi. Far to the west, the species had another good winter in Oregon and Washington.

Barnacle Geese, many of which may be of wild—that is to say, Palearctic—provenance have been noted with increasing frequency in the mid-Atlantic region. This winter, there were reports from New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. On the other side of the continent, a Barnacle Goose in California triggered the usual question of "origin." Are populations of the Cackling Goose, recently elevated to full-species status, on the increase? It is gratifying that field ornithologists are tackling Cackling Goose identification head-

on; in time, we should have a good picture of population dynamics in this species. The distinctive *leucopareia* (Aleutian) race of the Cackling Goose has, in fact, been monitored for quite some time now, and the 5000 in Humboldt County, California, reflects recent gains for the population.

A mid-winter waterfowl inventory in Ontario netted an alarming 790 Mute Swans, and there were reports of 201 individuals distributed widely across Ohio; smaller numbers were noted south to Kentucky and Tennessee. Trumpeter Swans, continuing to increase, included 70 near St. Louis, Missouri, 58 across scattered locations in Nebraska, and 1515 near Clear Lake, Washington. Tundra Swans are wintering farther inland than in the past, evidenced by the 2139 on the Long Point, Ontario C.B.C. More than 1800 lingered into December in Ohio, 856 were counted along the Mississippi River in Illinois, and 857 made the Clinton, Iowa C.B.C. Smaller flocks wintered west to Kansas and Oklahoma, and the species was widely reported in small numbers in Arizona and New Mexico.

Continuing a recent trend, Harlequin Ducks were in good numbers in eastern coastal Canada. Farther south along the coast, numbers in New York and New Jersey were rated as excellent. Erie County, Pennsylvania, had two, and there were reports from multiple locations in each of the western Great Lakes states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

Wild Turkey is spreading into new (or previously occupied) haunts throughout North America. This winter, there was evidence of movement northward in Ontario and west-

In addition to northern owls and feeder finches, boreal forest and montane frugivores made southward and eastward movements that were extraordinary—if not quite "without precedent." In the Great Plains—but less so in the Great Lakes or Northeast—Pine Grosbeaks (top, at Guymon, Texas County, Oklahoma 2 January 2005) and **Bohemian Waxwings** (above, below Fort Peck dam, Valley County, Montana 6 February 2005) launched irruptions that startled even veteran observers. The grosbeak was thought to be of the subspecies *leucura* rather than the closer Rocky Mountain *montana*, perhaps a clue to the origin of this flight in Canada's boreal forests (a stray in the California desert in November 2004 may also have been *leucura*). **Varied Thrushes** (upper left, at at New Glascow, Prince Edward Island 30 January 2005) and **Townsend's Solitaires** (left, at Schooner Pond, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia 7 February 2005), by contrast, were scattered from the Midwest through the East Coast and quite far south. All this wandering suggests perhaps a failure of fruit and seeds in these species' core ranges, a very productive breeding season, or, perhaps, both. *Photographs by Steve Metz (top), Stephen J. Dinsmore (above), Beth Hoar (upper left), and Allan and Cathy Murrant (left).*

ward in British Columbia. Farther south, the species is expanding into Santa Cruz County, California. There, as elsewhere in North America, Wild Turkey is being reported from heavily developed districts.

There were yet more West Coast records of Manx Shearwater this winter. Two off Westport, Washington, were the first winter sightings for the state. Singles in California were noted off Monterey and Los Angeles.

Wintering American White Pelicans are being reported from many locations in which the species was formerly scarce or absent. This winter, multiple individuals were noted in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina. South Carolina's best single-location count was 477. Inland in the East, there were records from Ohio, Arkansas, and elsewhere. The mountain states got in on the action, too, with seven in Wyoming and several in southeastern Colorado. In the far West, there were multiple sightings from British Columbia, where the species had been unrecorded in winter. Finally, good numbers in El Salvador and Guatemala reflect recent wintertime increases in northern Central America.

Wintering vultures continue to push northward in increasing numbers. Black Vultures were reported in good numbers in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and 100 were noted in Johnson County, Illinois. Wintering Turkey Vultures, too, are on the upswing: the top single-location count in Nova Scotia was 14, and two tarried in Québec. More than 1000 were tallied on Ohio Christmas Bird Counts. In New Mexico, where the species had not wintered in the past, at least 20 were reported from three locations.

There was good news, especially in eastern North America, on the Bald Eagle front. Selected highlights include about 500 from New York and New Jersey; 395 along the Rappahanock River in Virginia; and high counts of 1694 and 187 in Illinois and Indiana, respectively. Southward-spreading Golden Eagles were widely in evidence, with rebounding numbers in New York and New Jersey and encouraging numbers again reported from Maryland and Virginia. Numbers were considered good, too, in the western Great Lakes. There were reports, mainly of singles, from as far south as North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Farther north, though, in New England, the number of reports was lower than usual. Two falcon species are trending in opposite directions in eastern North America. Dismally low American Kestrel counts came from New Jersey and Ontario; several recent studies have pointed to sharp declines in eastern North American populations of the species. On the flip side, increasing Merlins included 45 in New York and New Jersey. At least five birds were in Pennsylvania, at least 28 were seen in Ohio, and there were reports of singles from 11 Kentucky–Tennessee counties.

Sandhill Crane is undergoing a rapid expansion of its eastern wintering range. Notable were reports from Maine, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maryland—far from the core wintering area. Impressive counts farther west included 106 on the Long Point, Ontario C.B.C.; double digits from various localities in Pennsylvania and Ohio; and 350 at Des Plaines, Illinois. In the core range, the Hiwassee, Tennessee C.B.C. turned in a fine count of 14,610.

The ongoing Lesser Black-backed Gull invasion of North America was evidenced by such high counts as 500+ in Broward County, Florida and 272 on three Bucks County, Pennsylvania C.B.C.s. At least 25 were noted on the Yucatán Peninsula, apparently a significant stronghold for the species in North America. Small numbers were very widely noted throughout the lower Mississippi River valley and into the southern Great Plains, and more than 20 were recorded in Colorado, where the species is now expected in small numbers. Farther west, two strayed to Utah and one each to British Columbia, Washington, and Sonora.

Doves, like geese, are faring well in North America. Band-tailed Pigeons are increasingly noted during the winter months in Colorado, with double-digit flocks recorded at two locales in the state this past season. Invading Eurasian Collared-Doves were noted as far north as Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Montana, and Oregon. Impressive counts included 18 in St. Genevieve County, Missouri, and 28 at Ballantine, Montana. Meanwhile, triple-digit counts were reported from various towns in southeastern Colorado and in New Mexico, as well as in and around Ejido San Pedro, Chihuahua. Two well-birded counties in California got their firsts, and there were records from the Yucatán Peninsula and from Costa Rica. An exception to the general rule of columbid good fortunes in North America is the Spotted Dove, which remains in drastic decline in southern California. White-winged Dove numbers are exploding in the core range of the species in the southwestern United States, and strays are increasingly noted. This winter, singles wandered to New Brunswick, Massachusetts, Maryland, Georgia, and Nebraska. South Carolina and North Carolina each posted two, and eight made their way to Florida. The species is increasing sharply in Colorado, with close to 100 documented there this winter. Mourning Doves are increasing in Hawaii, and the estimated 300 at Kealia were the highest ever by far for the state. Up to 4 Inca Doves were reported from Thibodaux, Louisiana, where the species is increasingly noted, and 10 made it to Johnston County, Oklahoma. There were multiple records from Colorado, too, where the species is establishing a toehold. There was generally good news this winter for Common Ground-Dove. Singles wandered northward to Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Utah, and two were at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area, Oklahoma. A goodly 20 were noted at the Savannah Spoil Site, South Carolina, and news of a previously undetected population in Kern County, California, was welcome. In the Ruddy Ground-Dove department, Mississippi got its first, and two remained at Cottonwood Campground, Texas. At least eight were noted at two New Mexico locales, and numbers were higher than usual in Arizona. Up to 15 were observed near Calipatria, California, and two others were noted elsewhere in southern California.

Black Phoebes are wintering farther north than ever, with reports this past winter from Oklahoma, Colorado, and Washington. Meanwhile, the species continues to expand its range northward in Oregon, with two reports from northerly locations in that state.

The versatile and superb Common Raven is slowly but surely filling in the holes in its North American range. This season, there were reports from the eastern Piedmont of Virginia, plus word that the species is spreading south in both Ontario and Texas. Meanwhile, the species is faring well in the "extreme" environments with which it is typically associated; for example, a robust 1860 were counted in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories in early January.

In recent winters, Barn Swallows have been widespread in the Pacific Northwest. This past winter, interior British Columbia produced 12 at seven locations, and there were 118 along the British Columbia coast. Washington produced three interior records, and Oregon four. Meanwhile, triple digits were noted along the Washington coast. Farther south, 92 were detected moving northward along the northern California coast in December. It is still shocking to think of the Cave Swallow—considered a "mega" until about 10 years ago—as regular along the East Coast in early winter. There were 3 or 4 in New Jersey, double digits in coastal Virginia, and several inland in Maryland. Farther south, Cave Swallows were widespread in North Carolina and South Carolina.

Finally, Tufted Titmice continue to spread northward in southern Canada. Several were reported from western New Brunswick, and five made it to the Québec City region. Meanwhile, the species continues to invade Ontario.

Category 5

Peppered atop long-term population trends (often decreasing or increasing, sometimes holding steady) are short-term blips, burps, hiccups. Some are simply statistical "noise," arising from intrinsic random variation, inad-

equate sampling, or both. Others are biologically real phenomena, given rise to by weather events, food shortages, etc. They can last from weeks to years. What is the distinction between a short-term fluctuation of long duration versus a long-term trend of short duration? The breakpoint is essentially demographic: short-term fluctuations typically happen within a generation, whereas long-term trends usually span multiple generations. But there are many exceptions to the rule.

For our purposes, Category S (for "Short-term") phenomena can be viewed as playing out within a season or two. And there was no shortage of interesting Category S phenomena during the winter of 2004–2005.

Barrow's Goldeneyes made waves in the hot desert states. From New Mexico, eight individuals were present at four locations. At Glen Canyon Dam, Arizona, there were 59. And two in Baja California were the first confirmed record for Mexico.

Roadside Hawks were reported from three Texas counties. Intrinsic random variation? Or was there a link to some external factor? Unquestionably the latter, with the hawks being accompanied by a staggering number of individuals of other Mexican species that wander to Texas only occasionally. See the Texas regional report and the Photo Salon for details on the 2004–2005 Super Flight.

Northern Lapwings were widely scattered in eastern coastal North America, with singles noted in Newfoundland, Maine (unconfirmed), New York (unconfirmed), Maryland, Virginia (unconfirmed), and North Carolina.

Alcids penetrated far to the south along the East Coast. Common Murres were in better-than-usual numbers: 43 were noted at Rockport, Massachusetts and farther south, 7 were seen off Delaware, with singles to Virginia and even to South Carolina. The Thick-billed Murre invasion was even more impressive. Good numbers came in from Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Scattered smaller numbers were recorded south to New York, New Jersey, and Delaware, and there were reports south all the way to North Carolina and South Carolina. Smaller numbers of Razorbills and Atlantic Puffins were noted well to the south of usual, too, with singles of both species as far south as Florida.

Northern owls staged a massive invasion southward, with the scene at Sax–Zim Bog near Duluth, Minnesota, attracting national media attention. Excellent numbers of owls were also noted across southern Canada and into central Alaska, and scattered smaller numbers were recorded from New York to Iowa. The Sax–Zim, Minnesota C.B.C. produced 42 Northern Hawk Owls, and 87 were banded in central Saskatchewan. Farther afield, 25 were reported from Québec—impressive, but not on par with the approximately 200 there during the winter of 2000–2001. Much farther north, the species was scarce in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. One made it all the way to Oregon, the state's third. Great Gray Owls were likewise on the move. In Minnesota, several parties ran up single-day tallies of 200+. Approximately 600 were reported from Québec, and some 250 were noted in Simcoe County, Ontario alone. To the west, 74 were banded in central Saskatchewan, and two in North Dakota were that state's first since 1966. Farther east, though, only one was recorded in Canada's Atlantic provinces. Southward, three made it to Iowa. Some 150 *dead* Boreal Owls were noted in and around northeastern Minnesota. Elsewhere, 15 were noted south of the breeding range in Québec, several were reported from Ontario and southern Manitoba, five ranged south all the way to New York, and one in Iowa was a first for the state.

Red-headed Woodpeckers invaded the East Coast, with about 10 each in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and about five in Prince Edward Island. Smaller but still above-average numbers were noted in the New England states. In New Jersey, the 46 in New Jersey's Great Swamp were remarkable. Good numbers were noted farther west, too; for example, 163 were tallied in Jackson County, Illinois. The farthest west of all was a stray to Utah, the second for the state. But numbers were much reduced in Kentucky and Tennessee, due perhaps to a regional hard mast failure. And was the mast failure, in turn, connected to the dispersal of birds elsewhere? Red-bellied Woodpecker, a species whose range has been slowly expanding for decades, surged northward this winter. At least 150 were noted in the Atlantic provinces, 39 in Québec, and at least 246 in Maine. Record-high counts were recorded on various Ontario Christmas Bird Counts, and birds were noted north of their usual haunts in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Downy Woodpeckers dispersed into the western lowlands. A *leucurus* ("Mountain") Downy Woodpecker was photographed on the Colorado plains, 14 were counted at low-elevation Farmington, New Mexico, and singles were noted at four lowland locales in Arizona.

Time out! It is not the case that tidy trends can be associated with every bird population. Case in point: Northern Shrikes this past winter. The flight into New England was "mixed," whereas numbers in New York and Virginia were considered good. Numbers were exceptional in Indiana and Illinois, normal in Iowa, and below average in Utah and Nevada.

In the fall of 2004, Blue Jays irrupted into the far west. Numbers dwindled in the ensuing months, but holdovers were nonetheless widely noted. The tally for the winter season was three in Utah, two in Nevada, 37 in Washington, 17 in Oregon, and one in California.

Townsend's Solitaires disperse eastward in small numbers every winter, and this past winter's flight was especially heavy. The major concentration, as expected, was in southeastern Canada, the northeastern United States, and the Great Lakes region. The final tally, which shows roughly diminishing numbers with increasing distance from the core range, was as follows: North Dakota 60, Minnesota 15, Iowa 10, Wisconsin 8, New Brunswick 7, Québec 7, Michigan 4, Nova Scotia 2, Ontario 2, and singles in Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Any time you have three Redwings in one season in North America, you're looking at an "invasion." This year, there were records from Newfoundland (the eighth for the province), from Pennsylvania (the state's first), and from Washington (also a first). And what do Alaska, the Bahamas, and the Yucatán Peninsula have in common? All of these places saw notable numbers of American Robins during the winter of 2004–2005. Double- and even triple-digit flocks were scattered across southern coastal Alaska, and at least five wintered inland all the way to Fairbanks. In the Bahamas and on the Yucatán Peninsula, single-digit flocks were widely noted. Varied Thrushes invaded much of the North American continent. Records piled up in the East and in Great Lakes regions, but there were strays all over. The numbers, greatest to the east of the core range and smaller farther away (and in the Southwest), tell the story: 26 in Minnesota, 8 in Wisconsin, 7 in both Ontario and North Dakota, 6 in Arizona, 4 in both Michigan and Massachusetts, 3 in Colorado, 2 in both Pennsylvania and Kansas, and singles in Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Québec, South Carolina, Ohio, Iowa, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

What are we to make of Bohemian Waxwing movements in the winter of 2004–2005? In some of their traditional wintertime hotspots—e.g, Newfoundland, upstate New York, and parts of New England—the flight was light. But numbers were good in northern Maine. And elsewhere, they were delightfully abundant. In the North, Bohemians were common and widely distributed in Ontario, and they were in good numbers in the prairie provinces. Working southward, up to 1200 were found in Duluth, Minnesota, some 5000 were registered in Pennington County, South Dakota, and more than 10,000 were reported in Colorado. Small numbers invaded the southern Great Plains, and a few strayed all the way to Texas and New Mexico, where there are few previous records.

The Cedar Waxwing story calls to mind the Red-headed Woodpecker situation. Numbers were decidedly low in central U.S. states such as Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

But observers elsewhere saw many. From New Mexico to Québec and northern Brunswick, numbers were higher than usual. And the real news was from outside the United States. There were 11 in two flocks in the Bahamas, and Central America had its largest invasion ever. More than 700 swept into the San Salvador, El Salvador area, and birds were widely noted in our region as far southeast as Panamá. One wonders how far into the mountains of South America the species actually penetrated.

One of the more-hardy parulids, Pine Warbler was widely noted in northerly climes this winter. The flight into the Atlantic provinces was rated as excellent, highlighted by a cluster of four at Blacks Pond, Prince Edward Island. They were all over New England, too, where 30 were tallied. Elsewhere, seven stayed on in Ohio, five lingered in Illinois, three found their way to Kansas and two to Oklahoma, and one made it to New Mexico.

Harris's Sparrows enjoyed a banner season in the far West. Higher-than-usual numbers were reported from Washington and Alaska, and the 15 in California were above average. In the Great Basin states of Utah and Nevada, the flight was rated as exceptional. Scattered reports elsewhere included two in New Brunswick, one in Québec, two in New York, one in Florida, four in Ontario, and three in Michigan. But for the first time in five years, the species was not recorded in Illinois or Indiana, closer to the main wintering range of the species.

In much of North America, observers had their hands full with one or more species of irrupting finches. In a mini-dispersal of Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches, singles were reported from Québec, Ontario, Michigan, Minnesota, and South Dakota. The Pine Grosbeak flight called to mind that of the Bohemian Waxwing, with normal or below-normal numbers in the traditional northeastern hotspots but with impressive numbers elsewhere. For example, the flight was light in much of maritime Canada, northern New England, and New York. But numbers were good in the Dakotas, and small flocks wandered to the southern Great Plains, from which region the species had been essentially absent for 35 years. A slight incursion was detected in Colorado, and the flight in Arizona was the largest in memory. In the Pacific Northwest, birds wandered widely in British Columbia and Oregon. An extensive Purple Finch invasion surprised observers throughout much of North America. The flight in the Atlantic provinces was considered to be "perhaps unprecedented," and the incursion into Texas was the largest in 20 years. A strong presence was detected in Ohio, and excellent numbers were chalked up in Nebraska and Kansas. The flight in Colorado was exceptional, and one individual strayed to New Mexico.

Category Z

In the Southern Great Plains regional report regional report, mention is twice made of "zooties." What, pray tell, is a zootie? Well, a Google search returns unedifying results. But the meaning is clear enough, in context: a zootie is a freak, a rarity, a marvelous addition to the stamp collection. (By the way, the Southern Great Plains report in this issue is notable for its depth of analysis, and the report is to be commended to all readers.) Surely, certain sightings are of zooties, of "Category Z" birds. They're just plain weird. It doesn't make sense to force them into a big-picture mosaic of long-term range shifts and population changes, of short-term irruptions, spikes, and crashes. Right? Maybe, maybe not. Consider the examples of the following five zooties.

A Great Black-Hawk in Miami–Dade County, Florida, prompts the obvious question: wild (zootie) or Exotic (er, *zooey*)? But it's not that easy. There have been sightings of the species in the area since the 1970s, and the status of the species in the state is unclear. South Florida—well populated, well birded, and supposedly well known—is surely the proving ground for the serious field ornithologist of the twenty-first century. Its vast avifauna of non-checklist entries is virtually undescribed, and this past winter's Great Black-Hawk is more cynosure than zootie.

What on earth are we to make of a December record of Chuck-will's-widow in Ohio? In the view of the regional editors Vic Fazio and Nick Pulcinella, the bird may have been a reverse migrant. Now, in the case of this particular confused caprimulgid, we'll probably never know. But a general knowledge of the reasons for vagrancy—reverse migration, mirror-image orientation, post-breeding *Wanderlust*, etc.—is of tremendous usefulness in the matter of understanding and interpreting dispersal.

Please read Héctor Gómez de Silva's Mexico regional report; the addition of this region is one of *North American Birds*' most exciting developments in recent years. In particular, please give thought to the record of a White-striped Woodcreeper, a Mexican endemic well out of range and out of habitat, in a riparian woodland in northern Chihuahua. If the bird had flown just 42 miles farther north along the San Pedro River, it would have made it to the United States, where it would have established itself as perhaps the most unexpected U. S. vagrant of all time. Imagine! A dendrocolaptid—just about as exotic, as tropical, as you can get—right here in the United States. And a Category Z zootie? Not necessarily. Was this woodcreeper's wandering part of a bigger picture? Was it connected somehow to *the* event in the Lower Rio Grande Valley? To the Tufted Flycatchers in Arizona? To the Rufous-backed Robin in Utah? To the Great Kiskadee in New Mexico? To the hordes of Maroon-fronted Parrots drifting about in northern and central Mexico?

What was the context for the 21 Northern Rough-winged Swallows in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in early January? The species is a very early "spring" migrant, of course, frequently returning to the southern United States by early January. But 21 in Philadelphia in January are "without precedent"—that two-word cop-out that birders and ornithologists employ all too often. (To the credit of the regional editors, those two little words do *not* appear in their discussion of the swallows. It is safe to say, though, that someone, somewhere, in discussing this record, used that expression.) Indeed, there is considerable precedent for this sighting. For more than a decade, North American swallows have been doing all sorts of curious things in winter. Consider the examples of Barn Swallows in the Pacific Northwest and Cave Swallows in the mid-Atlantic states. And more generally, scores of bird species are wintering farther north than ever. The Philadelphia Rough-wingeds have plenty of broad context, if not necessarily within their species.

And what about the American Dipper that strayed to Dallas, Texas? Well, we know that montane and boreal forest birds wandered widely all over North America this past winter. Think of all the Townsend's Solitaires and Varied Thrushes, of all the Bohemian Waxwings and Pine Grosbeaks. There were more-local wanderings, too, for example, of Clark's Nutcrackers and Bushtits in the southern Great Plains, of Downy Woodpeckers and Red-breasted Nuthatches in the desert Southwest. Was the Dallas dipper truly a zootie, or was it part of a larger-scale dispersal involving many taxa? And how many other dippers went undetected? It is fair to say that few of us hunt for vagrant dippers (though not for fear of dipping...).

Coda

The preceding analysis—touching on everything from burgeoning goose and dove populations to invading thrushes and finches to a very cool vagrant in northern Mexico—is all over the place. There is none of the unification that physicists claim and that biologists aspire to. But we birders and field ornithologists, these past several decades, have developed the pedagogical outlook for making sense out of the avian complexity around us. We have learned to connect the dots, to discern patterns of and reasons for population change. We have learned to ask the simplest, but most profound, of questions: Increasing or decreasing? Expanding or contracting? Short-term or long-term? Conceptual unification is sure to follow.