AUTHORITIES MAKE TOO MANY MISTAKES

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The most competent field ornithologists can misidentify birds on occasion. In other words, man is not perfect and hence may make mistakes. To reduce these errors to a minimum, statisticians and other compilers of sight records, must demand of everyone a written report of the circumstances concerned with an unusual observation. This is necessary so that future authors can evaluate the sight record on the evidence obtained at the time of observation.

To understand the censor's point of view we must realize that, to him, the examples that follow are not exceptional events — they are commonplace! In fact, these were selected from thousands that I have actually observed or committed.

A frequent source of error is in misjudging size. Several times I have seen perched Starlings mistaken for Crows. Persons who have spent a great deal of time at Hawk Mountain have momentarily mistaken airplanes, butterflies and even gnats for hawks. Usually experienced observers quickly discover their error but on three or four occasions I have known a distant airplane to remain misidentified long enough for more than one person to express a serious opinion on what kind of hawk it was.

One competent authority I know misidentified a Crow because he was unaware of a size illusion even after some twenty or thirty seconds of discussion and looking at the bird. Finally one of his companions had to tell him that the bird perched in the top of an apple tree 150 yards away, which he persisted in calling a Crow, was in reality a Redpoll!

Another frequent source of error is color illusion. Two widely recognized authorities whose records are almost never doubted agreed that two birds were definitely swans, and wrote them down as such on their field record sheet. It then occurred to them to try to determine which kind of swan. They approached closer, and to their astonishment found their "swans" to be Black Ducks. Light conditions can perform apparent miracles in creating illusions of many kinds, especially of color. Many birders have known a "big white bird" to turn out to be a normally colored Crow.

It is generally stated (and to some extent true) that the validity of a record is greatly increased when several observers concur in its identification. The reader will note, however, that all of the following misidentifications cited here involve several or many observers, including in each instance a number of authorities of some repute. In each instance also, there was no likelihood that the observers were not all referring to the same bird.

Fox Sparrows had been reported in early September, some weeks earlier than normal, by the local bird authority in a small community. The following day six birders from elsewhere, three of whom are commonly acceded the status of authorities in their home county, went to verify the report. The three leaders were pointing out several birds 15 to 40 feet away as Fox Sparrows to their three friends, who were concurring, when two more bird watchers came along who succeeded in convincing them that the birds were all Song Sparrows. Apparently no Fox Sparrows were present.

On another occasion at a meeting of bird students from several states, about 8 or 10 observers, most of whom were top experts in their respective parts of the country, finally agreed that a certain shorebird that they had been following and studying for some time was a Baird's Sandpiper. A little later someone who approached it more closely announced that it had yellowish legs. They re-examined it and this time all agreed it was a Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Misidentification of shore-birds by groups of experts is so commonplace, however, that it should scarcely require specific examples for any experienced birder to be reminded of this fallibility of the experts.

In spite of such occurrences, good observers are not likely to discover how often they may be wrong unless they break up into separate groups, see and identify some of the same birds, then get together and compare notes. This procedure is often so startlingly revealing that it might well be tried by clubs as a scientific exercise to prove the need for greater caution, skepticism, and verification. I will restrict my illustration to a single example. Three automobile-loads of us were on a field trip that was notable for the number of experts in each car. A large hawk flew low and slowly over the road while the occupants of all three cars stopped and examined it. A few minutes later we met and discovered that the occupants of one car had unanimously agreed that the hawk was a Red-tail, those of another car agreed it was a Rough-leg, and the third a Marsh Hawk.

On the Bull's Island field trip at the 1937 American Ornithologists' Union meeting, scores of this continent's leading ornithologists were standing packed on the deck of a boat when a large tern flew close in front of it. Nearly everyone saw it well. Immediately the boat sounded like the bleachers at an athletic contest, some voices calling Royal Tern, and about an equal number calling Caspian, with a number of eminent authorities in both cheering sections. Some were probably uncertain and said nothing, though it did not sound so. Since the tern could not be both species, about half of those who apparently were sure of their identifications had to be wrong. Yet they included many of the very best field experts in the world.

The immediate purpose of this paper is to promote a more widespread recognition of the knowledge that apparently all field students of birds make frequent errors in sight identification of which they often remain unaware. Insofar as this immediate purpose is achieved, two further steps should logically follow: first, a popular recognition of the unreliability of sight records as usually compiled, and second, a desire for greater reliability, with an increased interest in adopting scientific methods of verification.

Birders would then recognize that for an important sight record, there is a lack of adequate authority in any observer's mere reputation or in his avowed feeling of absolute certainty. These fallen authorities — reputation and avowal of certainty — must then be replaced by the superior authority of permanently available evidence, even if it is only written evidence of the mental processes by which a person determined the identity of a bird. Lacking material evidence such as a specimen, photograph, or sound recording, the person interested in making a valid sight record of a rarity will supply evidence by making a complete written record, preferably on the spot, that shows all the observations, reasoning, and other factors on which he based his identification. This account should be filed permanently in some known place where it will always be available to any qualified student for reference.

A mere "authority's record," without such descriptive particulars, is evidence only of an observer's feeling of certainty that he identified a bird correctly. It is not evidence that he actually did identify it correctly. A

permanently available description, however, supplies useful evidence. It can be examined in detail and used as the basis for a reasoned judgment as to the probable correctness of the identification. This written confirmation is both the evidence and the authority for the record. If the observer's techniques of observing and reasoning were adequate, he has an opportunity to prove it in his verifying account of how he identified the bird.

It should be added that although an observer's birding experience, knowledge, ability, and honesty are not, by themselves alone, sufficient to make his unusual sight records acceptable to a properly informed compiler, these achievements are none-the-less of basic importance. Every competent censor-compiler learns to look for signs of these characteristics in every verifying account by "reading between the lines," if necessary. Finding such signs, however, cannot add the least bit to the validity of a logically incomplete write-up; but failing to find them often invalidates a write-up which might give a superficial impression of being adequate.

Adoption of these verifying procedures will not give us sight records in which the correctly identified are always distinguishable, with 100% certainty, from the misidentified. But the improvement in the ability of compilers to judge the probable validity of the records will be enormous. It will be a great benefit to all who are interested in increasing the reliability of sight records. It will introduce some persons to the joys and rewards of using the scientific attitude in everyday living. Most pertinent for our present discussion, it will add immeasurably to the value and prestige of the sight records of those individuals, clubs, and compilers who adopt these verifying procedures, thereby achieving for them a goal long desired by every amateur field observer.

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BARROW'S GOLDEN-EYE AT AUSABLE POINT, LAKE CHAMPLAIN

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Ausable Point, composed of sand and silt, extends into Lake Champlain approximately 200 yards from the main shoreline. Shaped like a bended arm it contains on its inward curve several acres of water unaffected by wind action, regardless of wind direction, and to which large groups of resident as well as migrating waterfowl seek its advantages.

In the early breakups of ice in 1953 a single male Barrow's Golden-eye was observed feeding in this area. By late March when the American Golden-eyes were indulging in pre-nuptial display and courtship antics, this lone Barrow's male was observed trying to interest various female American Golden-eyes in the possibilities of a match. American Golden-eye males vigorously opposed such a situation and the frustration of the Barrow's male was pathetic as well as humorous to watch. This bird was seen for several days and then moved on.

On November 10, 1954 while hunting ducks from a blind at Ausable Point three Barrow's Golden-eyes decoyed to the blind, two were males, one a female. A male and female were collected, prepared into study skins and deposited with the collection of New York State birds at State University Teachers College, Plattsburgh, New York. The data on the birds are as follows: male, length 18″, spread 31″, weight 2 pounds, 2 ounces; female, L. 18″, S. 30″, W. 1 pound 7 ounces. American Golden-eyes collected during the same period weighed slightly less.