

CLARK S. BEARDSLEE

The Niagara Frontier Region suffered an irreparable loss in the death of Clark Beardslee on September 26, 1957. He served with distinction as regional editor from our area for five successive years, and had also acted as local chairman of the midwinter waterfowl survey. Though a very busy man, Clark always felt that his bird study activities should be given prime attention, and therefore, he was usually very prompt in completing these painstaking assignments.

A native of Connecticut and a graduate of Yale University, Clark had come to Buffalo in 1921 and lived here ever since. He was one of the founders of the Buffalo Ornithological Society in 1929, and served as its president on three separate occasions. He was one of the Society's statisticians for over twenty years. Clark Beardslee conducted a number of courses in bird study at the Buffalo Museum of Science. He also served on the board of managers of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences since 1948.

In observing birds, Clark kept careful notes which are of considerable scientific value and he often aided others to become more proficient in ornithology. He was an expert on bird songs and I was often amazed at his wonderful powers of hearing. I recall that on Goat Island in the Niagara River, in spite of the noise from the cataracts and the rapids, he pointed in the direction of a Brown Creeper which he had heard calling. We walked over 100 yards, on this and several similar occasions, before finding the bird. I look back with pleasure on the many field trips which Clark and I had together. On these I was always impressed by his knowledge of all the factors that enter into field identification.

Clark Beardslee and I have been working for years on an annotated check list of the birds of the Niagara Frontier Region and were awaiting the publication of the new A O U check list in order to finish our own check list so as to use the proper bird names. I am working hard to finish this, following the same style as we decided on in completing the bulk of the work which has already been finished.

No problem seemed too difficult for Clark to proffer his aid in solution, and he gave freely of his time to help others. His ready wit and keen sense of humor, plus the fact that he was loved by all, made his presence at our meetings an inspiration. It will indeed be hard to carry on without him.
—Harold D. Mitchell

THE VERIFYING ACCOUNT IN ORNITHOLOGY

CLARK S. BEARDSLEE

Editor's Note: *The Federation has lost one of its finest members. Clark Beardslee, regional editor for The Kingbird since 1952, died this past fall. Although I can speak of Clark only from my short association with him on this magazine, it was with a great sense of personal loss that I learned of his death from Harold Mitchell. As readers will agree after reading his summary of the verification problem, Clark represents care and thoughtfulness. Conservative by nature, but consistent and thorough, he has been a mainstay of this publication.*

Departing from a rule against reprinting articles published in other

journals, as a tribute to Clark Beardslee the following article is taken from The Prothonotary for May 1957 (XXIII (5):25-27.)

The following are the thoughts of one who was for twenty-one consecutive years one of the two censors of records for the Buffalo Ornithological Society; who after a rest of six years finds himself back in the same office, after the adoption by the Society of a new concept in the submission of significant records.

Historically, I think it would be true to say that up until the turn of the century the sight record, as we use the term today, was accorded little attention and no respect. Unquestionably the ornithologists of those days had good reasons, and we can assume that these were:

1. Very few "observers" were equipped with binoculars, even of inferior quality. Since the unaided eye is not capable of forming accurate impressions of small objects at distances at which birds may ordinarily be approached, this was a very serious weakness.
2. Almost all men had guns, and there were few laws limiting their use. Most identifications were therefore made by examination of freshly killed specimens.
3. The few bird books of the time were poorly illustrated, and the word descriptions were based upon the assumption that the bird was in the hand. Such phrases as "second primary shorter than first" and "tarsus longer than hind toe" filled the "Description" section, and one looked in vain for "Field Marks".

There were a few observers who studied birds without guns back in the nineteenth century; I came uncomfortably close to being one myself. But consider the changes which have come to field observation since 1900. The number of bird watchers has grown amazingly; superb books, designed to help the amateur, are available; automobiles and good roads have greatly enlarged the scope of an individual's birding; and bird clubs welcome the beginner with helpful programs, both in-door and out-of-door.

Today there are two schools of thought in respect to the sight record. One school, which includes, I think, most professional ornithologists, still clings to the old belief that sight records are of no value. The other school is the one which I wish to discuss.

Axtell has recently written four most significant papers: What Constitutes Adequate Verification? (Prothonotary, April, 1954). Can a Sight Record be Scientific? (Prothonotary, Feb., 1955). An Analysis of the Reasons for Writing Detailed Verifying Accounts of Unusual Sight Records, (Prothonotary, March, 1955). How to Write Verifying Accounts of Unusual Sight Records (Prothonotary, April, 1955).

Wrapped up in all these papers, and part and parcel of the program of the Buffalo Ornithological Society, is the serious belief that **SIGHT RECORDS CAN BE OF REAL VALUE**. It is of importance that ornithologists who study Axtell's papers should appreciate that he is suggesting only that all observers should make certain that their records *are* of scientific value. If the study of birds is worth anything, it must be worth that. I use the term "scientific." That is a word used by other people and other units.

We should recognize that if we *are* going to be scientific we must meet at least the minimum requirements of the term as it is used by others who are scientific.

If a really valid sight record is to carry conviction, it certainly must have a tag of some sort attached to it. I remember a visit I made many years ago to a meeting of a long-established bird club. A portion of the meeting was given over to reports of recent observations, and one member rose to tell of a trip she and a friend had taken about ten days earlier. The date of the outing must have been about April 20, yet among the birds these two observers were sure they saw were Red-eyed Vireo and Wood Pewee. No comment was made by any other member during the meeting. Later I asked their foremost authority whether records of such obvious invalidity did not have to face censorship; he replied with much embarrassment that they had never adopted a program of censorship and feared to initiate one. *Must we not agree that a good record from that bird club, surrounded by obviously bad records which carry the same stamp of acceptance, must unfortunately be considered to be worthless?* Yes, it lacks a tag of some kind to set it apart from invalid records.

The Buffalo Ornithological Society has given a great deal of attention to this important subject of a tag. At our first meeting on November 13, 1929 it was decided to keep "scientific records", and to elect two "statisticians", of officer status, whose duties would include the absolute power of censorship. Thus it might be said that every observation which found its way (and many did not) into our permanent records carried a tag saying, "This record was submitted by a person whose qualifications are well known to us. We have examined the record in all phases, and we feel certain of its validity".

So far as we know, we were as careful as any bird club in existence in our examination of member records. Our files contain many reams of correspondence with out-of-town observers, and I think the acceptance of every significant record was based upon either such correspondence or upon oral examination of the observer by both statisticians. This represented our policy throughout the first twenty years of the society's existence, when Harold Mitchell and I were statisticians. When we finally resigned, we were requested to name one of us to continue for another year in order to "break in" another incumbent. Thus the twenty-first year saw Harold Axtell and myself acting as statisticians, and we followed the policy outlined above. For the next six years Axtell and Nathan were statisticians. It was during this period that Axtell began to formulate his theory of *written* verifications for *all* significant records.

Why the necessity for a change? It is not a reflection on the care which we have taken in the past; briefly, it is that in the future a *written* record should be available for any student to examine, no matter how remote that future may be. Let me cite an example of one kind of tag. I quote two passages from Bergtold's "Birds of Buffalo and Vicinity":

1. "The names of no species have been submitted when the least shade of doubt existed as to the authenticity of their occurrence. In order to be authentic a bird must either have been taken and identified by competent persons, or if seen alive and not taken, must have been

of such easy recognition as to exclude the slightest uncertainty regarding its determination." (from the introduction)

2. "*Parus carolinensis*, R. 42, C. 47. Carolina Chickadee. Rare, Straggler, Lancaster, N. Y. — E. P. Van Duzee." (one of species listed.)

Here is a record with a tag. The tag states, in effect, "This record has been carefully examined by W. H. Bergtold, and carries his stamp of unqualified approval". Up until our present program was inaugurated, our own tag might similarly be taken to indicate, "This record has been carefully examined by (insert names of statisticians), and carries their stamp of unqualified approval." Just what will that mean when our record, like Bergtold's, is seventy years old? In many cases it will be capable of substantiation by the correspondence upon which its acceptance was based, but in those instances where the examination was oral, the researcher of the future will be forced to guess that equal care was taken, — and no good scientist will be satisfied to guess.

Axtell's conclusion is, let's furnish written verifications for all unusual records, and let's set standards for such write-ups which shall satisfy our desire for certainty. Then our ideal tag will contain such incontrovertible evidence, for researcher after researcher to examine in detail, that it will be as convincing as a tag attached to the leg of a specimen!

Here is a new concept, and I think it may be the beginning of a new era in field observing. As such it should command the attention of all groups of amateur bird students. As a matter of fact, a good many eyes have already turned in admiration toward the Buffalo Ornithological Society and its program.

Our program is not easy. It requires a modest contribution of time and effort to write up a careful and complete verifying description of all phases of an observation. It is true that we have lightened the burden by spelling out, in our Date Guide, those dates which will be considered by the statisticians as not requiring a write-up. But several times per year an active observer will find himself faced with the requirement that he furnish written substantiation for a record. He may feel at first that the task is a burden, and recall that formerly it was not required; but further thought brings to him the realization that he was fortunate enough to make a very important observation, and that his written account of it, if conscientiously made, will insure its validity and its recognition for all time. It then becomes a real satisfaction to write it, submit it, and note its acceptance.

A serious program of this nature may well be too great a challenge for some bird clubs. But careful study will, I think, convince anyone that in this direction lies success for amateur ornithology. After all, is it not worth while to place observation of living birds on a higher plane, — a scientific plane, — on a plane where the efforts of bird observers are circumscribed by universal standards of excellence?

CALL FOR PAPERS

The eleventh annual meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs will be held at Rochester on May 2-4, 1958. Federation members are invited to participate in the Saturday program of short papers.