

COMMENTS ON THE PREPARATION OF
FIELD NOTES AND REGIONAL REPORTS
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In the capacity of Regional Editor for the Finger Lakes, as well as Field Notes Editor, for *The Kingbird*, I have had the opportunity to formulate some ideas on the way material should be prepared and submitted for these sections of *The Kingbird*, and the way in which an editor can make use of such material. I stress, however, that this is just "one man's opinion" and in giving some of my own ideas, I sincerely hope to elicit some advice and suggestions from others.

"Field Note" may have several connotations, so we should begin by defining the term. In this paper, I am considering those short notes which follow the main articles in *The Kingbird* (and many other journals), which might, quite appropriately, be called simply "notes". But we use the term "field" because reports in this section of a journal ordinarily result from "field observations" rather than from laboratory or controlled experiments. The latter are not, however, excluded, and the notes section may well contain research reports of a non-field nature, too short to be an article.

With this paper, I am hoping to accomplish two things: to persuade more people to put their observations in writing and send them in, and to give a few helpful hints on writing up such notes, for those who find writing difficult, or who are uncertain about procedure in writing scientific notes. I hope, too, to reach some of those who never gave thought to the possibility that they have, in their files, material for a note.

Write-ups of observations, published in *The Kingbird* or other journals, are an important contribution to science. Don't hesitate to send in a note or article because you think you are an "amateur." Professional ornithologists (who are really quite few in number) are constantly making use of the published notes of the rest of us, who have had the opportunity to make observations in that aspect of bird study in which *they* (the professionals) are interested. That unusual bit of bird behavior, that very late nesting record, that nest in an unusual location, the strange method of feeding of a crippled bird at your feeder, roosting observations you may have the opportunity to make — such things as these, and many others, are fit subjects for short notes, to be offered to journals for publication. It does not have to be something out of the ordinary. It may, sometimes, merely emphasize the ordinary. The point of publishing a note is not to get your name in print, and editors do not view your offerings as such attempts. The point is that you have some information which it is your responsibility to share with others interested in birds. You *owe* it to your fellow birders to write it up. There are enormous gaps in our knowledge along many lines, and perhaps you may help fill a gap.

Once in awhile, the question comes up about a note concerning an observation made in another state. Should this be offered to (or accepted) by *The Kingbird*? I have used an informal rule of thumb on this. A note which describes bird behavior, a plumage, a nesting situation, for example — something which could have happened anywhere — would be fit material for our journal, or any other. But a note telling of the occurrence

of some bird, its appearance at the particular locality being the point of note — such notes, for *The Kingbird*, should be limited to New York State reports.

In writing up notes, it is advisable to study and follow the general style of the journal to which the note is to be submitted. Notes should be as brief as possible, get to the point quickly, the title or the first sentence or two telling just why the subject has been written up for publication. Flowery or "sentimental" expressions should be avoided, as should any indication of anthropomorphism. Personal interpretation of observations should be clearly pointed out as such. When possible, published references to similar behavior or situations, or to contradictory evidence, should be cited, to indicate an attempt at least to search the literature on the subject. It is usually advisable to include the scientific name of the bird in parentheses, so there is no possible doubt about the species discussed, but your editor can always add this if you do not have access to the latest A. O. U. Checklist.

Do not feel insulted if your note is turned down. Professional ornithologists have many rejection slips in their files, as do most writers. We are striving to set and maintain a very high standard for our journal. Your editors may have had the opportunity to be better acquainted, perhaps, than you with what have already been published on various subjects. Turning down your note may simply mean that there has been a lot published on this subject already, or the fact you are introducing in your paper is pretty well established without additional evidence, or you and the journal might be subject to criticism if your note is published in its proffered form. But we urge you to send us your write-ups — lots of them — and let us be the judges as to whether they should be published. Perhaps they should be submitted to another type of publication. We will be glad to tell you so, if this is the case. If you have never sent in a field note, because you feel that these are written only by experts in the field, or staff members of museums, or college professors — don't believe it. They are written by your fellow Bird Club Members, by your neighbors, and by people in scores of non-biological professions.

My colleagues and I, at the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell, go through the notes in all journals very faithfully, picking up scraps of information about the species or the subjects in which we are interested. Many of these are written by amateurs or part-time ornithologists. I urge you to think about some of the interesting things you have observed, sit down, write them up in your own words, then polish, simplify, clarify, add references when you can. Send these in — editors like to have a back-log of such notes, to draw on for future issues. I urge you to look over the variety of notes in the May 1961 *Kingbird*. Some of these end with a plea for additional information or observations on the subject. A note not only gives facts — it often points out a line of thought, or an approach, to be tried by others. The September 1961 issue of *The Linnaean Newsletter* carried a short note by Dr. Dean Amadon, on an unusual location for a Blue Jay nest. This is a fine example of the simple type of subject that is crying for publication. Haven't you made observations of this type?

Turning now to Regional Reports — those summaries of observations of bird life in the various Regions of our state — I point out that there are ten Regional Editors. I am quite sure that all ten of us use different methods of preparing reports, and frankly I consider most of the others superior to my own!

We are all trying to improve our reports, each quarter, and the following remarks indicate some of the ways in which those submitting material to the Regional Editors can assist in improving the summaries. These remarks are directed at the preparation of regional reports for any ornithological publication regardless of what that section may be called in another journal.

What actually is the value of a Regional Report or Summary of the Season for an area? It is not, as I have found a few people believe, a list of *who* saw how many of what, and where. At least that is certainly not where the emphasis should be placed. The Regional Report should indicate, for now and tomorrow, *what* has been present, *where*, at what *dates* and in what *numbers*. Its value lies not in entertainment reading, the day or week you receive the *Kingbird*, not in listing the names of active birders in that Region. Its value lies in the reference material therein contained. We turn to it the following year, for seasonal comparisons. We turn to it five or ten years later, to see trends in abundance and distribution. The item which seems of little importance today, may be of great importance ten or twenty years hence, when we are suddenly concerned about the distribution or the value of a particular bird. The datum of today is the reference material of tomorrow. Furthermore, Regional reports in *The Kingbird* will be examined, not just by New York Staters, but by students of a species or a family in all parts of the country, even as I read all the regional reports (whatever they may be called) in other state publications, to collect all the information I can on Pileated Woodpeckers.

Your name may be listed, following a bird record, for one of two reasons: to indicate that the report is not just hearsay — to give you as the authority for it and thus give it weight; and to permit a reader who wants to know more about the report or the bird to get in touch with you, the actual observer. We editors run into a real problem in regard to using names of observers. Let's face it: many enjoy seeing their names in print, and using the names may encourage more people to contribute their observations. But this can be greatly overdone. On the other hand, when names are omitted, we sometimes get the complaint: "I've sent you lots of reports and you never use them." This is usually far from true. The lack of a name, the lack of use of an observation in the exact form in which you have sent it, does not mean that we have not used it. Your report of abundance, or arrival or departure dates, or peak count dates, is lumped with many others, to give us an accurate picture that we cannot obtain from one report alone or from our own impressions. If I have seen no Winter Wrens in migration, it is not significant, but if a dozen observers mention seeing no Winter Wren, my impression is corroborated, and I feel safe in publishing it.

In general, the Regional Editors will give a reason for most items they include — which enables a reader from another region, another part of the country, to see the significance of the mention of a species. An Alabaman might wonder why one of our Regional reports stated simply "A Mockingbird was sighted on May 16." But if this is followed by "The first record of the species since 1933" it is evident to anyone that here is a rare bird for this region. Or "Many Cowbirds wintered this year" might seem like an unnecessary statement to a Mississippi Valley resident, unless qualified by "This continues a recent trend of the species to winter farther north, in part of its breeding range." But this does not mean that each of you who sub-

mits material to your Regional Editor must qualify every statement. Your list of arrival dates, or departure dates, your impressions of abundance, will guide his thinking, as he sorts out what is to be included in his summary.

Numbers are important and are too often omitted. The fact that ten Indigo Buntings were found this year along a stretch of road which usually produces four is far more significant than the statement "Indigos were up in numbers." But I emphasize also that numbers can be very misleading. Unless it is known that coverage is as complete as possible, and is truly representative of the area and time period, it is better to omit numbers than to give a doubtful or false impression. To say that only ten Black-throated Green Warblers were found all season is misleading — if you were the only one hunting them and you were absent during part of the migration or only checked half of the known breeding areas. If all your reporters feel the species was scarce, the Regional Editor is safe in stating this fact, without including statistics if they are not available or fully reliable. If you were out in the field every day, your peak counts, your comparative figures are very significant and should be given.

In submitting material for Regional Reports, we urge you to include a verification report of anything unusual, or send it along promptly if you are later requested to. The request to submit one is not a case of questioning your accuracy or veracity. An unusual bird, or an unusual date for a usual bird, deserves more of a write-up than the mere mention of the fact. I recommend to you the Buffalo Ornithological Society's little *Date Guide*, the second edition of which has just appeared. In this you will find that the system of listing the birds in itself is the clue to the status of that bird in the area covered. A report of a sighting of any bird not listed, any bird with no dates given, or any bird seen outside the dates listed, is automatically expected to be vouched for by additional information and the method to write this information is also outlined for you. This applies to all observers, beginners or advanced, amateur or professionals. The point is not to check up on you and your report — the point is to have the complete information on file for preparation of future revisions of the list. More Regions might adopt this or a similar system and by means of it strengthen their reports, eliminate painlessly all questionable records, collect valuable reference material. If no verification report is available for the unusual record, it can be automatically and with no further question omitted. The Editor is not forced into the uncomfortable position of making a difficult decision. The "Suggested Criteria for the Validity of Records", published in the February 1955 issue of *Audubon Field Notes* should be read carefully by contributors and editors alike, for additional ideas about acceptance of questionable records.

I urge Regional Editors to line up more good observers (who are dependable correspondents) for all sections of their Region, rather than relying only on the few "old faithfuls." Send them reminder cards at least two weeks ahead of your deadline making suggestions as to particular information desired this time. Utilize this material to the fullest extent, working in new observers as often as possible. Keep a file of all odd notes that come to your attention during the reporting period. While it's not necessary to acknowledge every report you get, give a pat on the back now and then to those who are faithful. And pass on, to other Regional Editors, reports you pick up from the other Regions.

The use of numerals and strike lines (2/7, 12/10) for dates is not recommended because of the obvious confusion that may result, and the ease of occurrence of typographical errors. Months should be written with an acceptable abbreviation. Number (of birds) below ten should be written out; above ten they may be given as numerals. Reporters are urged to refer to the criteria of abundance as published in the February 1957 issue of *Audubon Field Notes* for terms to be used in giving counts or impressions.

To help your long-suffering Regional Editors in their often overwhelming job of sorting, evaluating and organizing a mass of material, I urge you to put your report in checklist order if at all possible. A tabular form of report is also helpful, with sparing use of comments other than truly significant ones: (In other words if you had a fascinating experience with a Kingfisher, include it in a separate letter to your Editor, not in the tabular list of species on which you are reporting). The name of the bird should appear in the left hand column — followed by a dash or colon, then the comment and any pertinent data. Be brief, but stress in some way the significance of the report. In preparing his summaries, your Editor is greatly aided if he can run his eye down your page and pick out the species he is working up at the moment. Tell him also anything which might explain a drastic change in bird population that has occurred: drained swampland, a reforested area that has had a spurt of growth, new abandoned fields, an unusually heavy seed or fruit crop.

Finally, let's have more contributors all around. We need many of you, to make our reports complete and accurate. There is no closed corporation of Kingbird writers and contributors. We have many gaps in our ranks that need filling.

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REQUEST FOR INFORMATION — MIGRATION OF BUFFLEHEADS

A study of the Bufflehead is under way, and information on the migration of that species is needed. Data required include first arrival dates, peak date of migration and peak numbers, and departure dates. Only birds actually believed to be migrants should be listed, but, where pertinent, other dates on wintering or summering numbers should be included. If only infrequent visits are made to areas frequented by Bufflehead, the statement "present by (date)" is preferable to "arrival (date)", and last seen (date)" to "departure (date)". Information is solicited particularly for the spring migration of 1962 but it is hoped that interested observers will report any data they may have obtained in the past; requests for fall migration data will be made later. It is planned to colour-mark some Buffleheads in Maryland, New York, and Oregon during the winter of 1961-62, and observers should take particular note of any Buffleheads bearing bright patches of red, yellow, or orange. Please send information on the Bufflehead to:

A. J. Erskine,
Canadian Wildlife Service,
P. O. Box 180,
Sackville, New Brunswick,
Canada.