

THE VERIFICATION OF SIGHT RECORDS

This account presents the position of the editorial board of *The Kingbird* with regard to the acceptance of sight records. All but a minute fraction of records of unusual occurrences are now sight records, as few of us are prepared to collect specimens. Thus if the acceptance of rarities is based on specimens alone, the picture is distorted by the exclusion of the vast majority of occurrences. However, in order to give sight records permanent validity it is necessary to set high standards in the printed record.

The heart of any field note is a detailed description *taken on the spot*, preferably including sketches. It is unsatisfactory to view the bird in the field, taking insufficient or no notes, and then, after finding its supposed picture or description in a book, to proceed to write up a description or make a sketch. The on-the-spot description should be reasonably complete, not merely a listing of one or two distinctive features. An illustration of an acceptable field description is given in the field note in this issue "Least Tern at Montezuma." Obviously the amount of detail needed varies a good deal; a field description of a rare shorebird or sparrow is likely to be a good deal longer than that of an adult male Painted Bunting.

In addition to the detailed description, the ideal field note should include whether the bird was associated with other species, habitat, distance of observer from the bird, optical equipment used and the conditions of light, whether the bird was seen both in flight and at rest, date and duration of observation, previous experience with same and/or similar species, names of other observers if any.

Obviously a good deal of reliance must be placed on the reputation of the observer. It would be helpful if observers not known to the editorial board would mention in their letter to the field-note editor the name of an ornithologist or field birder known to the editors to whom reference could be made if necessary. The fact that a well-known observer has seen the rarity obviously adds support to it, but it does not preclude the necessity for a detailed, *on the spot* description. Harold Axtell, of the Buffalo Museum of Science, wrote an article "Authorities make too many mistakes" (*Kingbird* 5:37, 1955) illustrated with a number of striking examples. Although the fact that there were many observers adds support to the record, it should be remembered that the bird is often not critically examined by subsequent observers. They come expecting to see, for example, a certain rare sparrow and see what they expect to see. It is necessary to be critical about repeat observations, too.

In summary, we consider that field notes giving accounts of rarities (either in time of year or in locality) should only be accepted for publication in this journal if they contain a detailed description of the bird written in the field which confirms the identity beyond reasonable doubt. Readers interested in more detailed information are referred to articles by the late Clark S. Beardslee (The verifying account in ornithology, *Kingbird* 7:109, 1958) and the late Josselyn Van Tyne (What constitute scientific data for the study of bird distribution?, *Audubon Field Notes* 19:390, 1965) in addition to the article by Axtell mentioned above. For those who believe that the specimen is the only reliable record the account of the Hastings rarities (Nicholson and Ferguson-Lees, *British Birds* 55:299, 1962) is a 'must'.

FIELD NOTES

Least Tern at Montezuma NWR, Seneca Co.: On July 3, 1965 while watching for marsh birds from the dike of the May's Point Pool at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, the writer along with Mrs. Ruth Williams, Mr. Walter E. Benning, and Mr. Jon R. Bart observed an adult Least Tern (*Sterna albifrons*). The bird initially was flying over about 20-30' above the open strip of water adjacent to the dike, and made several short, steep plunges into the water, passed directly in front of the observers at a distance of 30-40' and worked gradually up the waterway, and in five minutes passed out of sight westward over the marsh area. Observers were using 7X to 10X binoculars and one observer (JRB) was able to follow the bird closely with a B&L Zoom Scope mounted on a gunstock. Time 1800 EDST; light excellent. Details of the observation taken at the time are as follows:

Small white tern, markedly smaller than the local Black Terns, with very fast, fairly deep wingstroke, rapidity of wingstroke increased when hovering just prior to plunging into the water; body totally white as was moderately forked, rather short tail; upper back and wing surface very pale pearl gray with dark gray along outer primaries from wrist to tip; crown and line from eye to bill black but forehead white, in a pattern like a boomerang with thickest portion near bill-base; a few white feathers in anterior portion of black crown; thin, sharply pointed bill yellow with black tip; leg color not seen (bird never alighted); single "zeet" notes heard several times, but whether from Least Tern or adjacent food-begging young Black Terns not determinable.

The day of the observation a strong SW wind was blowing and had been so for the day prior. In view of this direction of origin of the wind and the inland location, the bird was probably from the Mississippi Valley population, but definition of this point demands collecting. Both the writer and Mrs. Williams are familiar with the species from observations on the Maryland-Virginia coast.

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Winter Wren Nest in Delaware County, 1964: Nests of the Winter Wren are notoriously difficult to find and there are few records of them in New York State outside the Adirondacks and higher elevations of the Catskills. Therefore, the