

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

ENHANCING THE ARCHIVAL VALUE OF REGIONAL REPORTS

The Regional Reports, as the name implies, report birds and birding in each of the 10 *Kingbird* Regions. However, when they are used for retrospective analysis, it becomes apparent that reports of uncommon birds dominate over reports of common ones. In fact, the rarer the bird, the more that is written and the more common the bird, the less it is mentioned. This is the birding equivalent of the old news editor's admonition that a dog biting a man is not news, but when a man bites a dog, that is news. Sure, common birds are not news and birders delight in seeing and reporting the rarities. However, what is common today may well be rare a few years later and what is rare today may be common in the future. Just consider Common Nighthawk, which was common a few decades ago but now is hard to find. Or take House Finch, which was only reported on half of the Christmas Counts in 1974-75, but now are so common some birders try to discourage them at feeders. The value of Regional Reports to record information about New York's birds for posterity is compromised by this tendency. Further, I believe that common species of birds may serve as monitors of environmental change. The absence of Sedge Wren may disappoint some birders, but not seeing American Robin or Tree Swallow would alarm all. What panic will strike should Red-winged Blackbird or Common Grackle fail to appear in the spring - or when European Starling is nowhere to be seen. The Regional Reports have the potential to preserve for our posterity what population levels were observed in the past—our present. Many Regional Reports do not even mention the common species and, when they do, they just accord them a passing remark.

When I was compiling the last decennial index of *The Kingbird*, I thought that perhaps the Regional Reports could be combined into a checklist or table. Every species could be mentioned every season. However, scoring each species might be tricky. All other considerations aside, each season every bird species is either present or it is not, and if it is present, then the species was either present at its expected level, or it was above normal, or it was below normal. Altogether, this leaves four possible scores: absent, below normal, normal, and above normal. A mechanism to compile and to reach a consensus as to the overall status as indicated by field birders would have to be established to make such a tabulation work. But once in place, all 10 Regional Reports could then be published as one comprehensive checklist or table, with the status of

every species indicated as Absent, Below Normal, Normal, or Above Normal. The Regional discussions could continue as they are, and there are a variety of ways by which unusual or rare birds could be reported. A substantial problem is that the definition of what is normal can change over time. Bald Eagle was not as common at the beginning of the last decennial period, 1981-1990, as it was at the end. In such cases, we may have to trust the judgment of the Regional Editors, who often make these evaluations now.

When neither field contributors nor the Regional Editors make such evaluations, the readers may assume that common species not mentioned were at normal levels or else something would have been said. But how does the reader know? My checklist proposal would clarify such questions. I do not know if this is the best way to improve the archival value of the Regional reports. I do hope this letter will stimulate discussion of what I feel is an important issue.

Donald A. Windsor, PO Box 604, Norwich New York 13815