

LETTER — REGIONAL REPORTS. CHANGES WERE NO IMPROVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

As a subscriber to *The Kingbird* for over twenty years, as well as a former Region 10 editor, I have followed with interest the recent discussions of form and content in *The Kingbird* (Windsor 1996 and 1997, Marcotte 1996, Ferrer 1996, Wilson 1996, Spahn 1996 and 1997, Lauro 1997, Suggs 1997).

Both Journal And Magazine Needed

Windsor (1997) makes an important distinction in pointing out the differences between a journal and a magazine. More important was his realization that many of the readers of *The Kingbird* think of it as a magazine, while he – the editor, thinks of it as a journal. Personally, I too have always looked at it as more of a journal than a magazine. Windsor also says that a magazine “is free to cater to reader demands ... it has to or it becomes extinct.” A journal, however, is not free of the danger of extinction merely because it is a journal. Research libraries contain many “fossils” of journals that ceased to meet the demands of their readers and became extinct. Any periodical must attract and hold a readership. I think a source of the conflict running through the recent discussions is indeed a difference in view of *The Kingbird*, but it is one that Windsor only briefly touched upon. It is the view of *The Kingbird* as primarily a storehouse of potential research material, as opposed to a publication to be read for its content now. In the first case the audience is the future, in the second the audience is the current readership. Spahn (1996, 1997), Wilson (1996) and Suggs (1997) are all emphasizing *The Kingbird* as a long term database, while Ferrer (1996) and Lauro (1997) are taking the more immediate view. Neither view is wrong. A publication must take both views into account. In weighing the two goals, however, it must be remembered that the second has a very important role in determining a publication's continued existence and thus its ability to fulfill the first.

Older Literary Style Preferred

Over the years I have been a subscriber, *The Kingbird* has gone through a number of changes, primarily in the form of the Regional Reports. Many of these changes, I believe, have been in an effort to make them somehow more scientific in form and content. Unfortunately, one result has been to render them virtually unreadable. Twenty years ago the Regional Reports were written

in full (or nearly full) English sentences – both the introductory paragraphs and the main body of the reports. I routinely read my home Region's report and skimmed other Regional Reports to get a feel for what was going on across the state. It has now been years since I read the Regional Reports, except when forced to for research purposes. In writing species accounts for the upcoming revision of *John Bull's Birds of New York State*, I did not find the more recent abbreviated style any more helpful than the older literary style, quite the reverse. It was harder to read, and certainly boring. I also think writing the reports in coherent English sentences forced Regional editors to think more about the observations submitted. I know it did for me. I realize that "space (= cost)", as Spahn (1996) put it, is a consideration. *The Kingbird* today averages more pages per issue than ever, however, is anyone reading them?

Observer Initials Preferred

The question of saving space brings up another point. As a past Regional editor I agree with Lauro (1997) on the importance of including observer initials on all records and not sacrificing these to some space-saving measure. It is important to acknowledge the efforts of the birders who contribute to the Regional Reports. Limiting the use of initials to "special" records as advocated by Spahn (1996) will, I believe, be counter-productive. Marcotte (1996) and others have pointed out the importance of reports on common birds, not just rarities. As a Regional editor I regularly pleaded for such material. To only place observer initials after "special" records sends exactly the wrong message to contributors! It says that only unusual records are considered important. In the long run, I think it will discourage contributions.

Arrival, Departure Tables — The Weekend Effect

If the space devoted to observer initials is truly that critical, thought should be given to the space allocated to the tables of arrival and departure dates published twice yearly. In the years these tables have been appearing in *The Kingbird* I don't believe one of the truly amazing "phenomena" they "document" has ever been pointed out. This is the tendency for migratory birds to arrive and depart on weekends! As an example, I have analyzed the Spring 1997 arrival dates given in the September 1997 issue (pp. 250-252). A total of 864 arrival dates for the ten Regions are included in the table for the months of March, April and May. Of these 328 dates, or 38.0% fall on weekends. During this three month period 27 of the 92 days, or 29.3% were weekend days. All else being equal, you would expect 29.3% of the arrival dates on weekends, rather than 38.0%. A standard chi square statistical test shows there is less than a .00000002 chance of this difference being due to random chance. In a month by month analysis, the bias in favor of weekends is even more striking in the

early months of the migration period: March - 32.2% weekend days, 49.5% weekend arrival dates; April - 26.7% weekend days, 36.9% weekend arrivals, May - 29.0% weekend days, 35.9% weekend arrivals. While the bias in favor of weekends diminishes as the season progresses, it never disappears and is statistically significant in all three months. Of course, this is an artifact of observer effort and reflects the fact that birders do most of their birding on weekends. The bias is lessened as more birders spend more time in the field during the peak May migration period, but it is always there. Considerable space (and effort) is expended in *The Kingbird* looking for average "differences" usually amounting to a day or two, when the "resolution" of the data, so to speak, is six to seven days wide. In addition, because of the way the calendar works, there is an automatic shift of at least one day from one year to the next as the days of the week shift.

It has been stated that "early and late dates, while interesting to birders, are mainly weather, observer effort, and luck driven" (Spahn 1996). There is undoubtedly much truth in that, but the same is at least equally true for arrival and departure dates though their tabulation tends to lend them a veneer of precision. Should the tables be discontinued? Not necessarily. If they are of interest to the membership of the Federation, that is sufficient justification for them, provided of course their limitations are understood. I did not do this analysis of the arrival dates table to in anyway disparage the tremendous effort they represent. I merely wish to point out the trap of thinking that putting observations into a tabulated, numeric form in some way automatically makes them more scientifically valid than other forms of observational data.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe the various views expressed in these on-going discussions are all valid. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to accommodate them all in a single publication in a way that will make everyone equally happy. Trade-offs and compromises must be made. *The Kingbird*, while it has many of the aspects and goals of a journal, is the publication of a membership organization made up primarily of non-scientists. Its existence depends on the support and input of that membership – all of it volunteered. High standards should be maintained, but *The Kingbird* must remain of interest to the members of the Federation. My own bias would tend toward current readability while not sacrificing standards or content. I do not believe these things are mutually exclusive. The editor has the unenviable job of finding this balance and walking this tightrope, while others throw things, in the form of their opinions, at him (*mea culpa*). As both a Federation member, and the editor of the Linnaean Society of New York's newsletter, he has my understanding, sympathy and good wishes.

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