

EDITORIAL — PARTING SHOTS

Donald A. Windsor

PO Box 604, Norwich NY 13815

ABSTRACT — The departing editor reviews his accomplishments and failures. Use of information transmission and bibliographics is explained. Regrets over not being able to launch a point-counterpoint feature are lamented. The importance of stray birds to parasite distribution is realized. A simple measure of avian diversity is advocated.

INTRODUCTION

This is my last issue as editor. My three year hitch is up. The main reason I am leaving is because of an irreconcilable mental conflict which boiled down to me or *The Kingbird*. The kind of ingenious articles I love to write (Windsor 1998 Apr, Dec) cannot be interrupted by quarterly deadlines. Creativity cannot be scheduled; it must be harvested when it occurs.

There are two distinct operations to publishing a journal, the editing itself and the production. Editing, the shepherding of intellectual content, is a tedious but fascinating joy. Production, the clerical construction of printed pages, is a damnably frustrating labor of agonizing drudgery. Production includes everything from file conversion to keyboarding to page layout, whatever is needed to produce camera ready masters for our contract printer. Ideally, these would be two separate jobs for two volunteers, an editor and a producer.

While I will certainly not miss the production, I leave the editing with some regrets. Many of my objectives are still unfinished. Upon taking over in 1996, I set two major goals: to transmit more information in a reader/researcher friendly manner utilizing high quality bibliographics, and to encourage greater understanding of important birding issues via a point-counterpoint debating forum wherein controversial subjects could be discussed in a civilized manner. Here is a review.

INFORMATION TRANSMISSION

My intention was to make *The Kingbird* a formidable avian information piece, a reference book on the installment plan (Windsor 1997). I had absolutely no interest in making it a magazine. There are too many birding magazines already. Although I fell short of my goal, perhaps I can make some headway here by just articulating some aspects of that admirable notion.

An article transmits information from the author to the reader. So, why garble the message? Why hide it? The biggest fault I found with incoming manuscripts was a burying of information. I had to go over some of these texts with a fine dredge to uncover the punch lines. Upon discovery, I dragged them up to the front where they belong.

Most authors learned to write in school, where the teachers had a commitment to read whatever was submitted. In the real world, no one has to read anything you write. Therefore, writing must be done to compete for readership. An article must snag the potential readers' interest before they turn the page. The punch line must be hurled at them; it belongs in the title, or at least, in the abstract.

Titles and Authors

Titles and authors must never be decoupled. These two components comprise a bibliographic handle by which articles are grabbed, just like a suitcase. Our entire library tradition exploits the time honored card catalog concept of author file and title/subject file, retained to this day by the electronic medium. And yes, the title should tell what an article is about. In the case of a bird journal, the name of the bird subject belongs in the title. As for anonymous contributions, anonymity is the camouflage of cowards.

Abstracts

Installing abstracts was a great step forward. Most readers of most journals do not read every article. Informative titles are a nice guide, but more information is usually needed to help with the decision whether to read or not. Abstracts serve that purpose. Abstracts must be able to stand alone, an important consideration for electronic dissemination and for reference sources. The great value of BIOSIS and MEDLINE lies in their provision of abstracts. And, as an additional benefit, writing an abstract helps authors clarify their thoughts. It forces them to ask the profound question, "What is this article about?" The ultimate goal is to achieve what *JAMA* (the Journal of the American Medical Association) and the *New England Journal of Medicine* have, structured abstracts, wherein specified concepts appear in certain parts of the abstract. In *NEJM* the last line is always a one sentence conclusion. The biomedical literature is such a joy to search; yet, the ornithological literature remains so clumsy. I wish I could change that, but other projects are more important.

Style Guide

Faced with an endless array of style choices, why not choose the one that is the most authoritative and is used by the majority of biological journals? This is what I did when selecting Huth and others 1994. It would be folly to go with another style.

Standard Journal Format

Presentation of information in scientific articles has evolved throughout the years from an exchange of letters to our current standard format. The original letter format is why many journals still stick the author's name at the end. If a researcher inadvertently skips a couple pages, the wrong author can be fingered.

All bibliographic information should appear on the first page of every article (Huth and others 1994 page 580). Standard format enables readers/researchers to find information rapidly, without having to read the entire article.

Standard format is: TITLE - ABSTRACT - INTRODUCTION - METHODS - RESULTS - CONCLUSIONS - REFERENCES.

If a researcher is looking for a particular method, a quick glance at the METHODS section should be all it takes. Many bird papers have no real methods, so an OBSERVATIONS section is more appropriate. As an analogy, suppose you were a burglar stealing television sets. You would look first in the living room and then the bedroom; you certainly would not waste time searching closets, pantries, and bathrooms. The same reasoning applies to articles; information should be easily found where it belongs.

The CONCLUSION section is most interesting because most articles reach no conclusions, and so, a DISCUSSION section is substituted. This is very helpful to researchers, because articles with no CONCLUSIONS can be interim progress reports or they might reveal additional information.

Whether a format is standard or custom made, readers deserve more than page after page of monotonous type. I encouraged shorter paragraphs and tried to make sure some kind of a section break appeared on every page. Every article now ends with a = to let the readers know the article is finished.

References

Insisting on references has been a sore point. Many birders believe that merely reporting their observation of some bird is all that should be necessary. It is, for the Regional reports. But, to make an article out of it, references are required. Why? Because information resides in the configuration of a citation network, where publications cite previous publications. Over time, these connections form a matrix wherein intellectual content is linked together. Ideas do not stand alone; they are interconnected. The citation network is the knowledge base of science. A discovery is any information that has not yet been published. How do you know if you have a discovery, if you do not have a clear view of what has been published and what has not? For more explanation, consult Price (1965) and Margolis (1967). If you do any research at all, these articles will be very helpful. The indispensable resource, *Science Citation Index*, is based on the principle of citation networks.

In the half century that *The Kingbird* has been published, its 47 volumes have accrued 1352 articles. Unfortunately, 565 (41.8%) have no references; they are dead ends. On the bright side, 787 (58.2%) do have references. Of these, 349 (44.3%) contain at least one reference to *The Kingbird*. It is this set which increases in value as the years go by. Articles which have adequate references are information resources.

I have read every article in *The Kingbird* and my vote for the best paper ever published is Wells and McGowan (1991). It has 25 citations to previous

Kingbird articles and, as such, is a masterpiece of information summation, a great role model for future authors.

Electronic Publication

Here is another area where I did not make much progress. However, now that we have a web site (<http://birds.cornell.edu/fnysbc/>) perhaps there is hope. The internet is transforming birding in a major way. *The Kingbird* must participate in that revolution. The best article to date on the relationship of paper to electronic journals is Walker (1998). In a nutshell, *The Kingbird* should go online, starting with the contents, article abstracts, and Regional Highlights. *Science* and *Nature* are the world's top journals and serve as good models to emulate for best practices. Every week they cover this topic.

CONTROVERSY

Not getting a point-counterpoint feature off the ground is my greatest failure. The best way to understand any issue is to approach it the way debaters prepare. They know the topic, but do not know which side they will have to argue. So, they learn both sides. The epistemological underpinnings are best founded in Hegel's famous dialectic, a thesis spars with an antithesis and a synthesis is hammered out. This synthesis can then become a thesis and can confront a new antithesis to form a new synthesis, and so on (Runes 1956).

A point-counterpoint feature would get two (or more) informed authors, each to write their own side of a controversy. They would then exchange papers and then rewrite, so that they would not be surprised upon publication. They would, in effect, collaborate to produce a nice succinct learning piece for the readers. Alas... I was not able to persuade any authors to participate.

STRAY BIRDS ARE IMPORTANT!

OK, I did learn something during this ordeal. Yes, stray birds do have a biological impact. Three years ago I thought all the fuss over birds blown off course was silly. Wrong. When a bird winds up in a place its species has never been before, it does much more than provide new state records and add to birders' lists. That stray bird can bring its parasites into a new arena, where new opportunities for new hosts abound. When Anna's Hummingbird (Grosek 1998) bellied up to the nectar bar in Binghamton, what parasites did it bring to its Ruby-throated drinking buddies? When the Broad-billed Sandpiper (Benner 1998) probed the muds of Jamaica Bay, what parasites did it place there? Which species of sandpipers will carry its Asian contagion, if any? The American Robin picked up the tapeworm *Variolepus planstici* from European Starlings (Ballard and Olsen 1966). Parasites of birds enjoy more opportunities than those of other vertebrates, save perhaps of humans in the jet age.

AVIAN DIVERSITY

I once thought we could replace the Regional reports with a giant checklist (Windsor 1995). However, after working on them, I now have a much deeper appreciation. Still, they could transmit more information at a relatively small expenditure — by faithfully noting the total number of species reported each season, and always in the same position, at the end of the species list.

Not every species turned in by field observers gets listed by their Regional editor, just the "major" ones. Blue Jays, American Crows, American Robins, European Starlings, House Finches, House Sparrows, and their ilk are hardly ever listed. Yet, they probably have a greater biological impact than the rarer ones. While it may not be feasible to list every species by name, disclosing the total number of species would provide an elegant measure of avian diversity. Some Regional editors already do this: Koeneker and Purcell (Region 5), Peterson (Region 7), and Graves (Region 8). How about the rest of you? Why be stingy with information? Knowledge must flow from those who know to those who do not know.

THE END — FINALLY

Some readers may resent this long editorial. But hey, I slaved away here for no pay and at a considerable expense to myself. Consider these parting shots as due compensation. Or, more appropriately, take this as a bully fluke parasitizing a *Kingbird*. If this still gripes you, write a letter — to the next editor.

LITERATURE CITED

- Ballard NB, Olsen OW. 1966 Apr. Helminths of the starling, *Sturnus vulgaris vulgaris* L., from northeastern Colorado. *Journal of Parasitology* 52(2): 372.
- Benner W. 1998 Sep. Broad-billed Sandpiper — first record for lower 48 states. *Kingbird* 48(3): 1812-185.
- Grosek RJ. 1998 Dec. Anna's Hummingbird in Binghamton, New York. *Kingbird* 48(4): this issue
- Huth EJ, and others, Council of Biology Editors. 1994. *Scientific Style and Format. The CBE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*. 6th Ed. NY: Cambridge University Press. 825 pages.
- Margolis J. 1967 Mar 10. Citation indexing and evaluation of scientific papers. *Science* 155: 1213-1219.
- Price DJD. 1965 Jul 30. Networks of scientific papers. *Science* 149(3683): 510-515.
- Runes DD. 1956. Hegelianism. In: *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Ames, IA: Littlefield, Adams & Co. p 123-124.

- Walker TJ. 1998 Sep-Oct. Free internet access to traditional journals.
American Scientist 86(5): 463-471. Letters responding in Nov-Dec issue
86(6): 500,502-503.
- Wells JV, McGowan KJ. 1991 Spr. Range expansion in Fish Crow (*Corvus
ossifragus*): the Ithaca, NY, colony as an example. *Kingbird* 41(2): 73-82.
- Windsor DA. 1995 Dec. Letter to the editor. Enhancing the value of Regional
reports. *Kingbird* 45(4): 274-275.
- Windsor DA. 1997 Sep. Editorial — A reference book on the installment plan.
Kingbird 47(3): 166.
- Windsor DA. 1998 Apr. The Endangered Species Act is analogous to
Schindler's List. *Conservation Biology* 12(2): 485-486
- Windsor DA. 1998 Dec. Most of the species on Earth are parasites.
International Journal for Parasitology 28(12): 1939-1941.

=

