

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Monday, June 21, 1999

Dear Manny:

I read with great interest the recent report of the New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC) for 1995 (*The Kingbird* 48: 301-308). Of particular note, was the surprising rejection of records for Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) and Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) from the Bridgehampton, Long Island area in the late winter of 1995. Readers may remember that these birds occurred within a short distance from the very well-watched Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) and were seen by many birders, including at least one member of NYSARC! In fact, the lapwing was discovered by birders from Delaware who were searching for the crane, which had been reported on the New York City RBA. The purpose of this letter is not to contest the ruling on these submissions, but to ask why additional reports were not solicited by the committee and to make some general comments on the relationship between NYSARC and the birding community.

As I understand it, only one observer reported on these particular birds. I assume there was some problem with his/her write up but I am afraid we are no wiser from reading the bare bones annual report. Multiple submissions would most likely have ensured a different outcome. Doubtless this particular case reflects a natural tendency to assume that others will submit the reports and this is why a state rarity committee must take an active rather than passive role in the record gathering process. It is common practice in other states and most certainly in other countries, for rare bird committees to actively solicit details of rarities. For example, growing up in the UK, I was contacted on multiple occasions by the secretaries of both regional and national bodies requesting details of birds that required review. In an effort to plug obvious holes, the British birding literature often carries requests for descriptions of specific birds.

Overall, I think this issue highlights a serious problem in the relationship between NYSARC and the rank-and-file birding community in the state. This situation is borne out by the low submission rate (only 65 reports for 1995). Since first moving to New York in 1991, I have been troubled by the resounding lack of confidence in NYSARC within the local birding community and have heard few words of praise. My perception is that there are two main problems:

(1) Lack of feedback to individual contributors: According to the NYSARC Guidelines (*The Kingbird* 1998; 48:116-119) observers will be advised as to the acceptance or non-acceptance of their report using a form letter. Reasons for rejection will not be given as part of this notification and observers must write directly to the current committee chair. I believe this aloofness is guaranteed to create bad feelings. Observers are more likely to simply stop sending their reports than enter a somewhat intimidating correspondence. Again as a young birder in the UK, submissions were almost always followed up with note of thanks and in time, with details of acceptance/rejection. I recall tremendous pride in receiving a few lines from the Secretary of the British Birds Rarities Committee (a figure akin to God), informing me of their acceptance of my submissions. On one occasion, I was even informed that the committee was notably impressed by the quality of the write-up - a lasting source of encouragement to an anxious fifteen year old! Returning to the situation in New York, I am sure the committee can devise a small series of 'standard' letters, either congratulating the contributor or advising them in general terms what was wrong with their report. Where appropriate, specific details can be added to the letter. For example, that the ruling is supported by additional experts outside of the committee, that the description does not firmly eliminate a specific similar species or that the reported bird corresponds to a known escape. The observer may actually agree with these recommendations and I am certainly convinced that a few gentle words of explanation will do a lot to ease the anger and/or disappointment of rejection. If there is sufficient reason to reject a record then the committee should feel comfortable saying so. This responsibility comes with the territory.

(2) Lack of public justification of decisions: Reading the annual NYSARC report is an exercise in frustration and misses an excellent opportunity to educate birders on issues of identification, changing trends in the region's avifauna and how to prepare good reports. Take as a comparison, the equivalent reports from the California and Arizona Records committees published annually in *Western Birds*. Accepted records are accompanied by a sentence of two of pertinent information placing the record within the context of previous occurrences, relating the date to the normal timing of migration, mentioning that look-alike species were successfully eliminated and so on. Rejections are treated gracefully, often presenting sound reasoning behind the decision. For example, in rejecting three records of Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*), the California committee confirms that the birds were correctly identified - thus saving face for the observer - but then goes on to explain that the

timing or location of all three records were inconsistent with the established pattern of vagrancy, suggestive of escaped cage birds. In addition to the records themselves, the specific comments and a few choice illustrations creates a fascinating report that is well worth the hard work required to generate it. We can only dream of the same in New York. Most importantly, the published justifications help readers to understand what is required for accurate identification of birds out of their normal range. For instance, I am sure many observers simply do not appreciate the level of detail that is required to safely identify many species nor the usefulness of recording vocalizations. *British Birds* has a long-standing tradition of publishing exemplary submissions of major rarities accompanied by an editorial from the records committee. These provide marvelous reading and an ideal template for those writing their own reports.

I would presume that NYSARC's mandate is to achieve as accurate a record of New York's avifauna as possible. Surely this noble aim warrants an aggressive and active dialogue with the region's field observers? I am confident such a move will result in a greater number of submissions and an overall increase in their quality.

Sincerely,

Angus Wilson

4 Washington Square Village

Apartment 2-i

New York, NY 10012

E-mail: wilsoa02@endeavor.med.nyu.edu

