

EDITORIAL**OF WHAT VALUE ARE SIGHT RECORDS?**

One of the most difficult of the numerous tasks which beset the editor of an ornithological magazine is the determination of the scientific value of claims submitted for publication by observers in connection with the occurrence of rare and unusual species in a particular locality or area. Although certain publications bear a notice to the effect that *authors alone* are responsible for the contents of articles, the absurdity of this "solution" of a many-sided problem will be evident when it is pointed out that it is the editor, in the final assessment, who must shoulder full responsibility for all that appears in print.

Now, in recent years there has been an increasing clamour from some quarters for a relaxation of the standards employed in the adjudication of sight observations. After more than twenty years' experience with untrained observers and with those who lack the scientific attitude of mind, I am satisfied that some appalling mistakes can be foisted upon the unsuspecting ornithological 'diagnostician' or editor. The greatest menace is the individual who, having a reputation for knowing birds, manages to conceal a belief in his own infallibility. With common birds verification of every observation submitted to an editor is, of course, impossible, and it might be said that, apart from their plausibility, a large percentage of such records have little to recommend them. The prevalence of dubious and erroneous claims suggests that very few sight records of rare and unusual birds are completely above suspicion.

Consider, for example, the report made in October of last year of a "noddy" which had been "identified" with the aid of field glasses on two different days by one of our most enthusiastic members at the Airport near his place of employment. The observer, who testified to having seen noddies in Queensland, was aware that his claim was an unusual one and promised to shoot the bird. The specimen arrived at the Museum next day with the label "Noddy sp." Imagine my surprise when it was found to be a Silver Gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*) with feathers badly stained dingy grey, except for the top of the head, which was clear white! No

species of noddy (*Anous*) has ever been reported or taken in South Australia. There is little doubt that but for the unnecessary killing of a luckless Gull we would have been burdened with yet another unsatisfactory "sight record."

Many avoidable mistakes and misidentifications have been made by observers, who have relied solely on colored illustrations in such books as Cayley's "What Bird Is That?" I know of instances where wrong reports of this kind have appeared in several Australian natural history periodicals. Unfortunately, little can be done to prevent them from being quoted in the future.

Now there is another activity, very much in vogue of late, which is best described as 'bird-spotting.' So long as it is not confused with scientific bird recognition, bird-spotting can be considered a harmless sort of 'game' or sport whose essence is the rapid 'naming' of any bird likely to be met with on a day's outing. The observations of bird-spotters are of no value except on those rare occasions when they can be investigated at a later date.

How, then, it might be asked, is it possible to distinguish between a field identification which is satisfactory and of scientific worth and one which is unacceptable? Modern bird recognition is a pursuit followed by many not because it is easier than the alternative one of collecting specimens, but because, having been developed along scientific lines, it can give comparable results without destroying birds. Proper identification in the field enables the serious non-professional student of birds to contribute to ornithology, which, it should be remembered, is a serious branch of science. A paragraph in the front of James Fisher's excellent 'Pelican' book, "Watching Birds," expresses my views exactly: "There is no reason at all why the ordinary man in the street should not be able to appreciate modern scientific work on birds. Most of this work is carried on on commonsense lines by biologists who realise how very useful the field bird-watcher can be to them; many of its results have already been realised by amateur naturalists and need only the scientific

perspective for them to be added to the sum of human knowledge."

Perhaps the first attribute of the reliable bird-watcher is a realisation of the limitations and pitfalls of his subject. If he is honest with himself he will acknowledge that it is not membership of an ornithological society which makes him an "ornithologist" but his mental attitude and approach to bird study. He will be aware that some birds have no reliable diagnostic field characters and that the circumstances under which they might be identified are so improbable as to exceed his wildest 'dreams.' In this category would be such birds as the male of the Brown Goshawk and the female Collared Sparrowhawk and the immatures of the Common and Arctic Terns. Then there are those species which can be separated only on the basis of a single (and perhaps not always visible) diagnostic character, e.g. Black-shouldered and Letter-winged Kites (genus *Elanus*). The unscientific observer will be confident that his 'word' alone will be enough to gain acceptance of his claims; he will consider that he knows more than the expert and will be most emphatic that he is never misled by tricks of light and shade and mimicking calls; unfavourable criticism will cause him to become hurt or angry. There is probably little hope for these people in the realm of ornithology.

The second characteristic of the reliable observer is that he is constantly on the look-out for the finer points of bird recognition. For example, it has been accepted for years by expert ornithologists that many birds can be recognised by their calls, and that it is unnecessary to see them. The careful student, however, never forgets the dangers of this method of identification, even in the case of common or well-known species. The introduced Starling imitates the calls of all kinds of birds—Kestrels, Willie Wagtails, Bushlarks, and several species of cuckoos, to name a few. Birds also have different "dialects," e.g. Magpie Lark (eastern and western Australian) and Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica*) whose call in the Interior differs from that of his relatives in the Mallee districts. No conscientious student would submit a claim based on a few notes from an elusive bird as evidence of a new locality record for an unusual species, however plausible it might appear. Yet it is common to find observers rashly attacking the "Sounds Barrier"—possibly a sign of the times.

The reliable observer not only has a good knowledge of the characteristics of all the species on his local list, but also a good working knowledge of bird distribution and seasonal movements. Above all he must be able to talk from experience; to gain this might take him five, ten, or even twenty years of careful study in his own district. An "interest in birds" for the times mentioned is no guarantee of proficiency—many "dilettante ornithologists" have no great skill or knowledge after forty years! But some idea of bird distribution will prevent anybody from reporting cassowaries from the Coorong and rain forest birds in the Mallee. A lot of people are under the impression that their sight observations should be classed as "facts"; when serious objections are raised they prefer to call them "opinions." Because a specimen is taken at a later date which seems to confirm an unsupported claim it must not be thought that the claim has acquired any *value*—guessing is the favourite pastime of those looking for rare and unusual birds.

A desire to "get in first" has prompted some members of this Association to suggest that all sight records submitted for publication should be accepted as "probables" or "possibles." Now, such a course would be very much open to abuse and the results would be chaotic. The reputation of the Association as a serious body in recent years has been preserved entirely by the contents of this Magazine.

The value of sight records depends largely on the reputation of the observer. Beginners and self-styled "experts" should remember that "it is entirely unsatisfactory to view a bird in the field, taking insufficient notes, and then, finding its supposed portrait or description in a book, even a short time afterwards, to proceed to work out an account or sketch of what was seen." (*Brit. Birds*, xlv, i, Jan., 1952.) They should be prepared to answer also the following questions, which are not unreasonable.

- (1) What previous experience have you had with the species?
- (2) Are you familiar with the species with which it might be confused?
- (3) Are you aware of the unusual nature of your observation?
- (4) Are there other observers who are willing to confirm the record?

- (5) What methods do you employ when identifying an unusual or unfamiliar bird?
- (6) What were the conditions at the time? Light conditions and distance of bird from observer, actions of bird, also its shape, actions and colours are important.

Unfortunately the personal equation is such that the only completely safe record is the

one based on a properly identified specimen, especially where rare birds are concerned. A knowledge of "field marks" will assist the serious student to achieve an acquaintance with many 'difficult' species, but it would be unreasonable to expect even the most trusting editor to accept sight records of rarities on the basis of field recognition points.

—H. T. CONDON.