

The Status of Sight Records

By ERHARD F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A.

An authentic list of the species of birds known to occur in South Australia is an indispensable adjunct to ornithology, and the same can be said of lists for the major geographical regions of the State. The ideal list is one containing the names of only those species whose occurrence within a given area has been definitely established by objective and systematic methods.

From the standpoint of science, the occurrence of any species beyond the boundaries of its normal geographical range is a matter of greater importance than a record from beyond the boundaries of a purely political and arbitrary region, but in ecologically similar surroundings. An erroneous species record for a geographical region must, therefore, occasion more concern to the scientific student of our birds than would some erroneous State records.

Species may be listed on either of the following facts: (I) That one or more specimens have been handled and positively identified. (II) That one or more individuals have been under observation and the species has been recognised by some character clearly distinguishing it from related species.

In both cases we are compelled, on scientific grounds, to consider the integrity and exactitude of the student. I have handled too many skins with wrong names inscribed on their labels to agree with the thesis that specimen records are necessarily positive and that sight records are necessarily negative. Ultimately, the credibility of a record, whether based on a specimen having been handled, or merely observed in the field, resolves itself into a question of the personal equation; for even with a skin before one, the inscription on the label is qualified by dependability of the collector or recorder of the data.

All other things being equal, however, it must be conceded that the record based on a skin or skeleton, the identity of which has been or can be verified by other workers, is more important than the report of recognition in the field. Moreover, there are many types of field workers, ranging from non-scientific, simple bird lovers to experienced field-glass

enthusiasts, and, finally, the cautious scientific-minded students. To grant equal status to bird lists compiled by each of these types of observers would, in the aggregate, land Australian ornithology in such a morass of error and confusion that it could not be rectified in half a century.

Bird study can only be truly scientific if it is objective as well as systematic; if deductions are subsequently verified. An observer's credit as a bird-watcher must always be dependent upon the paucity and plausibility of his errors of judgment.

A sight record of a species well known in the region, or which is very distinct in appearance and easy to recognise by an ornithologist familiar with it, can be given credence, but that of a puzzling species, difficult to identify in the field by ordinary observers, seen by an absolute novice, would be worthless, or, at least, open to grave doubt. Guess-work identification is altogether too prevalent and must be condemned by conscientious workers; and consideration be given only to those claims which state precisely how the identification of a specially interesting species in the field was made. Finally, in a State or regional check-list, a sight record must always occupy a status inferior to a record based on a specimen in the hand, even if made by the same observer.