

SOME ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON RECORDS

by Blair Nikula, Chatham

The recent article by Dorothy Arvidson on bird records and the letter from Eirik Blom (Bird Observer, 13: April 1985, 78) regarding the March 25, 1984 record of Mew/Common Gull from Falmouth prompt me to offer some additional thoughts.

As one of the regional editors for American Birds, it is my responsibility to make a decision about the many spring records (including the questioned gull) submitted from throughout the northeast. It is a chore that is both fascinating and frustrating. It is also a very effective way to make enemies! Ideally, when a records editor sits down to write a seasonal summary, he or she will have access to complete documentation for all rarities, preferably in the form of good quality photographs or, at the least, a thorough written description from one or more of the observers. Even better, the record and all documentation will have been reviewed by an avian records committee before it is included in any seasonal summary. Unfortunately, the former (documentation in any form) is still all too seldom submitted and the latter (committee review prior to publication) is seldom practicable.

Massachusetts does have an avian records committee which, regrettably, has been essentially dormant since its formation a few years ago - at least as far as current records are concerned. It is hoped that it will become more active in the near future but, even so, will have little effect upon the publication of questionable records. Based on the situation in other states, even where there is a very active committee, the review of records generally takes at least a year and often as much as two or three years, whereas the time constraints of regional publications usually require publish/not publish decisions to be made within two to five months after the sighting. Consequently, decisions are often based upon little more than the editor's gut feelings, bolstered perhaps by discussions with others who are familiar with the particular observation and/or observer(s). In some instances, the editor(s) may have little or no personal experience with the species in question. Thus, faulty editorial judgments are not infrequent.

Editorial errors are of two basic types. One is an error of omission, in which a valid report is rejected; the other is an error of commission, i.e., an incorrect report is accepted and published. Most editors would argue that the latter is the more serious error as it is very difficult to "erase" a record once it has appeared in print. Just as the observer faced with a difficult identification should begin by assuming that the bird is the most likely species until it can be proven otherwise, a reviewer should assume that a report of a rare bird is incorrect, or at least unpublishable, until supporting evidence is offered. THE BURDEN OF PROOF LIES WITH THE OBSERVER: with the exhilaration of discovering a rarity comes the responsibility for providing complete documentation. Although highly desirable, written documentation is not a panacea, however. For example, one spring I received a well-written description of a bird identified as a Western Sandpiper, a very rare spring bird in the northeast. I know the observer and believe the person to be careful and

competent. However, the description failed to eliminate White-rumped Sandpiper and was actually more suggestive of that species. Having misidentified White-rumps as Westerns on more than a few occasions myself and faced with an ambiguous description, I felt compelled to reject the record even though my gut reaction was that it was probably correct.

In another, more extreme case, I received four typewritten, single-spaced pages (!) describing in minute detail Newfoundland's "first" House Finch, which was seen at very close range at a feeder over a period of several days. The report seemed perfectly plausible given the species' continuing expansion, and had I nothing further upon which to base my decision, the record might well have appeared in American Birds. However, the report was also accompanied by two good-quality color slides clearly depicting a Purple Finch - slightly aberrant perhaps but most certainly not a House Finch. What the observer saw (and described at length) did not match what the camera recorded!

After again reviewing the description of the Falmouth Mew/Common Gull, I will admit to being rather lax in accepting the record. In addition to the written description, portions of which were excerpted in Bird Observer, I was also given a verbal description of the bird by another of the observers a few hours after it was first found. The bird was apparently very well seen by a number of people, and the sighting fits in very well with an established (and well-documented) pattern of Mew/Common Gull occurrence in the northeast. I consequently overlooked some of the discrepancies in the written description. While I am not at all convinced that the bird was an aberrant Ring-billed Gull, Eirik Blom's letter certainly raises some valid objections to the original identification. Reportedly, a series of photographs was taken of the bird but, to my knowledge, they have not been examined by anyone experienced with Larus canus. It is hoped that copies of these photos will be submitted to the Massachusetts avian records committee for eventual review.

It must be emphasized that the current system of records review and publication is, and always will be, flawed. Some of the problems can be alleviated, but as long as human nature is involved, the system will always be imperfect, and anyone using the records in American Birds or any regional publication needs to be fully aware of the inherent shortcomings. A healthy degree of skepticism and discretion is essential.

I agree wholeheartedly with Dorothy Arvidson's comments and urge all Bird Observer readers to help improve the system by providing thorough documentation for all unusual sightings. I also urge observers to develop a thick skin with respect to your reports. Rather than throwing up your hands in disgust and anger when a report is rejected, try to understand why it was rejected. Most editors are very willing to participate in a rational, unemotional discussion of their decisions. We must all, observers and editors alike, be quick to recognize our fallibility. The best, most respected birders in the country are characterized not only by their exceptional abilities, but by their caution, their willingness to admit to uncertainty when it exists, and their awareness that some birds simply cannot be identified. The acclaim that attends the discovery of a vagrant is a powerful intoxicant, but we must strive to prevent it from tainting our judgments and, ultimately, our understanding of the region's avifauna.