

## EXTRALIMITALS—IS IT A QUESTION OF THE RIGHT BIRD OR THE BIRD'S RIGHTS?

by John C. Kricher

"A bird's life should count as nothing against the establishment of a new fact."

This quote (*A World of Watchers* by Joseph Kastner, New York: Knopf, 1986, page 104) is from none other than the eminent William Brewster, founder of the esteemed Nuttall Ornithological Club, whose current membership includes some of the finest rare bird finders and chasers in this great nation of ours. Brewster's opinion, uttered in 1881, was the predominant view among ornithologists of his time. Mind you, professional ornithologists valued and took great esthetic pleasure from seeing live birds (otherwise why would these fellows have become ornithologists?), but the objects of their studies were nonetheless *objects*, whose lives, as Brewster so aptly put it, counted for nothing. Ornithologists, for understandable reasons, have a history of "do as I say and not as I do" with regard to bird shooting. Frank Chapman began the annual Christmas Bird Counts in 1900 to encourage watching birds rather than shooting them. Of course, Mr. Chapman added numerous specimens to the American Museum of Natural History during his distinguished career. To ornithologists, birds were, in many cases by necessity, specimens, to be collected, labeled, and studied. Binoculars and photography, then technologically far less sophisticated than today's optics, were extremely poor substitutes for the gun, especially with regard to the establishment of new records. But that was then and this is now.

A Ross' Gull appears at Newburyport. A Western Reef Heron shows up on Nantucket Island. A Cox's Sandpiper is netted and banded on Duxbury Beach—then correctly identified *after* release by examination of photos and measurements and by relocating and studying the bird. What if it had been immediately recognized as a Cox's? A Hammond's Flycatcher is videotaped wing-flicking in a Wellesley backyard (rumor has it that collection was seriously considered but ultimately was vetoed by the property owners, themselves birders). None of these celebrated rarities were collected, but should they have been? What could have been learned about them as specimens that outweighed in value the results of subsequent field observation? Could observation possibly yield *more* information than could be obtained from the specimen, or is it really essential to have the body to establish a new record of an extralimital? Beyond possible scientific value, what rights does the general birding public have to see these birds in their fully animated state? Many folks

journey for miles just to have a few minutes or even seconds to view the rarity. And, finally, what right does the bird have to its life?

Consider two examples. On August 8, 1979, a Zigzag Heron was carefully observed (and not collected) for seven or eight minutes at Explorer's Inn in Peru (Davis et al. 1980). Its behavior, particularly its odd pattern of tail-flicking, was noted. This brief observation comprises virtually the entire body of behavioral literature published on this rare species. Would the specimen, if collected initially upon encounter, have been more valuable? Several Zigzag Heron specimens are in collections. Essentially no information on behavior had been published, however. As a second example, a Western Reef Heron summered on Nantucket in 1983 (Vaughan 1983). Hundreds of birders made the trek to the island to observe the bird. One ornithologist was able to systematically study the bird's foraging behavior, documenting its daily pattern and species interactions (Davis 1985). The extralimital not only provided large doses of pleasure for birders, but information on its behavior was added to the published literature. Had it been collected shortly after its arrival, both the birders and those interested in foraging behavior would have come up empty.

What does it really matter if a "spooky" *Selasphorus* female goes permanently unidentified? The vast majority of extralimitals are, in fact, easily identifiable, and it is now routine to obtain photographs and even videotape of these birds. Yes, they are probably "genetically dead." It is doubtful that such birds return to their normal breeding ranges. On the other hand, however, it is not out of the question. I recall observing a drake Barrow's Goldeneye in a cove at Shark River, New Jersey, back in 1969. A drake Barrow's showed up every year *in that same cove* for thirteen consecutive winters (Leck 1984). Same bird? Could it have returned to its normal nesting range and bred annually and just had a more esoteric migration than most of its peers?

Loss of habitat and the loss of biodiversity contained therein is arguably the most severe global environmental problem. Earlier in this century, Edward Howe Forbush (1907) appealed to his readers to recognize the good that wild birds do in eating noxious insects. Much more recently Daniel Janzen (1988) has forcefully articulated the hope that humans will develop an ethical maturity sufficient to see living creatures, our co-inhabitants of the planet, as having intrinsic worth apart from pragmatic uses. Just as civilized humans value art museums and libraries, so too should they value natural ecosystems. Just as great paintings and volumes are afforded respect and protection, so too should organisms be respected and protected. Collecting, especially for the mere establishment of state records, is not highly compatible with this viewpoint. An extralimital bird poses no threat to anyone. A view of morality that extends to encompass such creatures, that confers upon them the right to be where they are, free from harassment and collection, is a morality that places intrinsic value on

biodiversity. Is it possible to ensure biodiversity without developing such a morality?

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WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR. and JOHN C. KRICHER are regular contributors to this publication and will present three *Bird Observer* workshops in March and April 1989 on the subject "Evolution as Illustrated by Birds."

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