

Doing the “Write-up”

Mark Lynch

Wherever birders are found, there will be reports of unusual and rare birds. Some of these reports will be worthy enough to enter the avian historical records and become part of the ornithological history of that area. Other reports will turn out to be, well, let’s just say “not as worthy.” It is simply amazing to me how scant are the details of unusual bird sightings that are at times submitted to the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC). Though many people saw the Couch’s Kingbird or the Elegant Tern, the MARC received extremely few written reports.

In this age of digital cameras, many serious birders now think that showing their shots on the internet is enough to constitute a full documentation of a bird’s occurrence. Though photography is obviously invaluable, a written record of an avian event is also very important. First, there may be plumage details, behaviors, or calls that you noticed in the field that are not recorded on any photograph or video. Second, details of weather, time of sighting, the length of time the bird was visible, etc. are important for historically viewing rarity records and possibly noting patterns of occurrences.

It is important to look at bird documentation in the long view. A hundred years from now, the photographs may fade, and the digital photo format may be obsolete, but a written record will still be readable. So, while you are at a rarity event, even if numerous cameras are clicking and videos whirring, please consider submitting a complete written documentation of what you saw.

What to include in a write-up

All pertinent details of the event. This includes date, time, exact location, the length of the sighting, the weather (include wind speed and direction), and the distance you were from the bird. The latter is often extremely difficult to judge in the field, so try to use some fixed objects in the field of view. If the bird is on the ocean, how far out to the horizon line: halfway? three-quarters? If the bird was in a field, how close was it to a certain fixed object like a tree, shrub, or rock?

Optics through which you viewed the bird. This is important. An unaided sight record of a Pechora Pipit in a large field is a very different record to consider than that of the same pipit studied through a scope at 60 power.

All details of plumage, color, proportions, and soft parts of the bird that you saw. If you can age or sex the bird, please include all the observed details that lead you to make this determination. Here I want to make a heartfelt plea for field notes. Write it all down first, check your field guide for critical field marks, and then add what you see or do not see. If you rely on your memory after the bird has disappeared, it is much too easy for your mind to create field marks that were not there. I always carry a notebook with me in the field, both to record numbers of birds seen and in case I

need to do a write-up. By the way, there is nothing more suspicious for a rarities committee to consider than a lengthy report of a rarity that is rich in minute details of a bird, even though the bird was seen only briefly at a tremendous distance. I don't care who you are, we are all subject to the very real physical limitations of human perception, and the eye and brain can only register so much.

A detailed description of the behavior of the bird, even if it was only sleeping. Personally, I find this more difficult to put into words than ticking off plumage details. Many of the words and phrases we use to describe a bird's behavior have such a subjective aspect to them. For instance, read how raptor enthusiasts describe the flight styles and jizz of the different hawks in *Hawks in Flight* for an example of subjective but evocative behavior description. Behavior descriptions can be too subjective. I once had a birder friend describe to me the flight style of a Peregrine Falcon as "looking like a girl running." To this day, I have no idea what he meant. That said, I do find the use of less obscure analogies very useful in trying to capture the look of a bird's behavior, as in "the bird flew like a Common Tern."

Include what your previous experience with this particular species has been. Was this a "life bird"? Have you written the definitive monograph of this species? (OK, this won't happen that much.) I am not going to say that your previous birding experience doesn't matter with a rarities committee. It does, but it is only one factor among many others which are weighed when evaluating your report.

Include your name and full address and the names and addresses of any other people who were with you when you saw the bird.

Getting other opinions in the field

Often, if I am with other people while viewing a rare bird, I will ask those around me to tell me what they are noticing about the bird. This helps me create a list of salient features and creates a more honest documentation as we each try to see some feature another has pointed out. Typically, this leads to further discussion and clarification in the field. "Is that an orange or a red gorget?" "Would you call that bill long?" "What do you think of the gonydeal angle?" The write-up thus becomes a give-and-take collaborative effort.

It is important at these times to avoid simply accepting another birder's judgment, just because she or he is supposed to be a "good" birder. On Plum Island in mid-October 1995 over 40 birders misidentified a Vermilion Flycatcher as a Say's Phoebe, simply because other birders told them that was what it was. Why did this happen? Because no one was looking critically. One way to start to look at birds with a critical eye is to take notes on what you are seeing. Then check your field guide against your notes. Are you really seeing the field marks noted, or are you just trying too hard to make it into the wrong bird?

You may feel a bit like Jimmy Olsen as you jot down details of the sighting from different observers, but the end result is a more complete and more accurate write-up. The weakest of all documentations is a single-person written report with no additional photographic evidence. As I mentioned before, we are all subject to the foibles of

perception, and even the best, most hardcore birders may not see important field marks and misidentify a bird. As David Sibley put it in his *Sibley's Birding Basics*: "In the field, however, identification is rarely 100% certain. One constantly encounters birds that are seen briefly or poorly, and in order to make an identification, one must make some judgment, some subjective interpretation" (p.3). To minimize the problems of a "subjective" view of a bird, the more observers (and the more write-ups) the better.

Submitting the write-up

After you get all your notes down in some semblance of order and have gotten all the details straight in written form, then mail your documentation to the MARC. I will not go through the whole process by which records get reviewed, but suffice it to say that it takes time, sometimes more than a year if it is a complicated identification. I am always amazed when, only a month or two after a rarity-sighting, people ask if the MARC has made a decision yet. Understand that MARC members have other lives and are not simply waiting with bated breath for the next report to come their way. Some records are even revisited for years after submission if a pattern of a rarity's occurrence becomes evident or if new identification criteria become available.

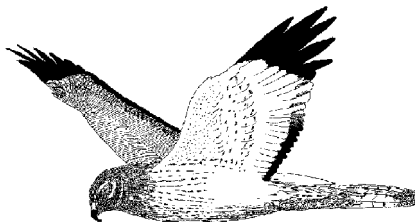
If your record gets accepted, well "congratulations!" – a hearty "well done" and all that. But if your record is rejected, well...it's not the end of the world. It probably means your details did not fit minimal criteria the committee needed to accept the record. This happens. If you submit records, you will get records rejected: it's a fact of field observing. No biggie; don't take it personally. Virtually every member of the MARC has had a record rejected at some time. You are in good company. You still deserve lots of credit for taking the time to document your sighting. That welcome and important effort alone sets you apart from most other birders. 🐦

Literature cited:

Dunne, P., D. Sibley and C. Sutton. 1988. *Hawks in Flight*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Sibley, D.A.. 2002. *Sibley's Birding Basics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Mark Lynch is an ecological monitor, teacher, and trip leader at Mass Audubon's Broad Meadow Brook. He is a teacher and docent at the Worcester Art Museum. Mark also hosts Inquiry, a talk show of the arts and sciences on WICN. He has done his share of write-ups over the years, and though he cannot honestly say the process is fun, it does get much easier the more experience one has with doing them.



NORTHERN HARRIER BY GEORGE C. WEST