



(above) There's more than one way to find out what everyone's interested in!

(above right) Mabel Gillespie & Eva Schnitzer get shore bird identification cues from Chandler Robbins.

(right) Everyone showed interest in Raymond Bubb's shore bird decoy (see his article starting p. 158)

Annual meeting photographs by J. Douglas Whitman



DOCUMENTING RECORDS OF RARE BIRDS

By Bertram G. Murray, Jr.

During recent years banders have caught a number of rare birds in mist nets. Some are first records for a state, or even first occurrences east of the Mississippi River. When these birds are captured there inevitably is raised a question: should the bird be saved as a specimen? More often than not the bird is banded, photographed, and released. Thus, the bird is lost forever, and the verification of the record depends upon the quality of the recorded description, photographs, or both. Many descriptions and photographs are equivocal, and there ensues a period of heated debate and hurt feelings.

Until recently the ONLY acceptable evidence of occurrence was the specimen. The specimen was required, because, from the professional's life-long study of birds, he knew that (1) he himself made errors of identification in both field and museum, (2) others had made errors of identification, as he annually discovered misidentified specimens in the collection, and (3) there were some species that are difficult to identify in the field. An example of the latter is the Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*), a species of the Far West, and the Bachman's Sparrow (*A. aestivalis*), a species of the southeastern United States. The Cassin's Sparrow was recently taken in New Jersey. Because of the similarity of these two species, and because of the greater likelihood of the Bachman's Sparrow in New Jersey, a word description and photographs would probably be inconclusive. A specimen in such cases is essential.

During the past decade or so there has been a change in attitude of the professional. Although the specimen is more desirable, most ornithologists today will accept a well-documented sight record.

What is an acceptable report of a sight record? We are learning that almost any species may occur at great distances from the normal range. Thus, the description should be sufficient to separate the bird from other possible, including improbable, species. For an illustration I have selected a description, published in *British Birds*, of a Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), a species familiar to all of us, which was first recorded in Europe at Fair Isle in 1959 (Davis and Dennis, 1959, *British Birds*, pp. 419-421). In addition to measurements, four photographs, and notes on behavior in the field the following description was published:

Head: crown chestnut with narrow grey central streak; superciliary pale grey; eye-stripe (obvious only behind eye) chestnut; ear-coverts and lores greyish brown; moustachial pale grey, bounded above with a narrow chestnut stripe and below with a narrow brown-black one.

Upper-parts: all feathers blackish-centred with a varying amount of chestnut outside the black, and with more or less pale grey edgings.

Wing: Coverts similar to upper-parts, but more foxy in general color due to smaller black centres and paler red-brown webs; tips of median

and greater coverts whitish, forming two rather indistinct wing-bars; flight-feathers dark brown with sandy-brown edgings; axillaries and under wing-coverts washed greyish-brown. Tail: grey-brown, rather warmer towards the base; slightly rounded in shape. Under-parts: white basically; feathers of breast and flanks (notchin or belly) with blackish centres bordered by slight chestnut streaks; the black breast-spot so obvious in the field was not very apparent in the hand; under tail-coverts washed buffish, with grey-brown centres. Soft parts: eye dark brown; legs brownish-pink; bill dark grey on upper mandible, pale grey on lower.

In Great Britain reports of sight records are given the severest criticism before acceptance. Many are rejected. Even so, one record that slipped past the editors of British Birds illustrates the importance of publishing a detailed account. Rush and Ryan (1956, British Birds, pp. 36-37) reported a Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) that was examined in the hand, described, photographed, and released. Surprising as it may seem, Wynne-Edwards (1957, British Birds, pp. 445-447) argued convincingly that the reported Harlequin was actually a Long-tailed Duck (Oldsquaw) (*Clangula hyemalis*)! He wrote: "There is an unrecognized similarity between the juveniles of these two birds, about which none of the standard reference books gives warning." Only the complete detail, supplied by Rush and Ryan, allowed the bird to be "re-examined" by other ornithologists.

Thus, errors can be made; errors are made. The facts of animal distribution - specimen and sight records - must be verifiable by other scientists. The reporter is responsible for presenting evidence of occurrence that can be evaluated by others. The best and easiest means is to have the bird put up as a specimen by a qualified preparator, who holds appropriate Federal and state permits. The alternative is to write up a detailed description and publish it with recognizable photographs.

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A NEW INTERNATIONAL ORNITHOLOGICAL PUBLICATION

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