

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sir:

In the Ohio Cardinal [11 (2)] you included a summary of sightings from all of Ohio's Christmas Counts, and heartily pat yourselves on the back that all were "submitted" to the Cardinal. In fact, not all counts were "submitted" by the compilers but seem to have been collected for publication, in some cases without the compiler's knowledge or consent.

Due to this bypassing of the CBC compilers, many sightings that were documented and photographed in an appropriate manner and the documentation and photographs sent to American Birds were listed as "Undocumented Reports" in the Cardinal. In fact, the observers were also unaware that their sightings were going to be included in the article by Montion and Kemp on Ohio's CBCs because documentations were not requested from the observers. No effort was made by the Cardinal to substantiate or disprove these observations. To make matters worse, these observations were included again in the Ohio Cardinal's records committee report, again as undocumented records. In at least one case, the Lake Erie Islands CBC King Eider, the bird was listed at the wrong location in the summary of count sightings by Montion and Kemp, and the correct location in the seasonal summary. Cardinal readers should be warned of the potential for errors and unedited nature of these Christmas Bird Count totals. American Birds has its own editors of Christmas Bird Counts, and edited Christmas Bird Counts will appear in print in finalized form as an issue of American Birds in the future.

In response to Tramer's article on why records were not accepted, I feel that far and away the most frequent reason that a record is not accepted by the Cardinal is that it was never submitted. The Cardinal records committee has not established itself as a viable force in Ohio birding. The committee's judgements on documentations and records are inconsistent at best, accepting poorly documented or misidentified birds while rejecting conclusively photographed birds. Many Ohio birders will continue to decline to submit records to the Cardinal. Their sightings can still be seen in American Birds after appropriate review.

Mary Gustafson
Columbus, Ohio

Ed Pierce responds:

I respect Mary's obvious close affiliation with American Birds, but I hope her zeal does not distort her mind into believing that somehow we are rival magazines. We are not. It is to the benefit of both magazines that we work together. After all, we rely upon the same birds and observers for the core of our information.

I subscribe to American Birds and enjoy it. But our [OHIO CARDINAL] number of subscribers indicates to me that many people do not want that degree of technicality or wish to supplement it. So, I see the bulk of our subscribers as more interested in the informational pages and photographs rather than the reports section or the Records Committee reports. They, in my opinion, prefer the sight guides, photographs of uncommon Ohio birds, discovery articles such as Rufous hummingbird, Brambling, Wheatear, etc., and in general, timely information on what is going on in bird watching around Ohio. Simply put, we are a medium for the exchange of information among Ohio birders. I know I enjoy the magazine because it allows me to stay up to date on what people are seeing and also to get more information about unusual sightings.

In American Birds, Ohio is simply one-sixth of a regional area. By necessity, the information printed there must be condensed and technical. Simply because the OHIO CARDINAL is solely concerned with Ohio birds, we have the space to expand upon that information, many times using the same observers. Also, because we do not have to print reports from the entire United States, we are able to report birds quickly. An example is the Ohio Christmas counts.

I personally collected the results of the fifty-nine Christmas counts this past year. I did it by writing to subscribers and friends and requesting their results. These people were not necessarily the compilers of the counts, but approximately forty of them were. I did not ask them for copies of their documentations, as I felt it was a burden enough on them to supply me with the results. Also, I found in the past (1980) when we first printed the Christmas counts, many of the documentations had been sent to American Birds and copies did not exist. Almost to a person, everyone gladly cooperated and sent in their results. Some were newspaper accounts with the species listing. It was truly a great cooperative effort to share birding information around the state and every person participating is to be congratulated. This is not an unusual procedure as other state publications in Colorado and Wisconsin do the same as I suspect does almost every other state publication nationwide.

However, it was our error to point out that certain species were undocumented when we had not solicited the documentation and the count participant had been so kind as to send us what he had available. I apologize to those observers which I believe must include Mary, whose sightings were treated in such an inappropriate manner. Most of us are hobbyists who find recreation and enjoyment in birdwatching and have fun trying very hard to put out a good magazine. We do make mistakes, but we try very hard to avoid them.

When the OHIO CARDINAL resumed publication, I contacted all four of the original members of the Ohio Records Committee and asked them to serve again. Only Dr. Tramer was able to do so. I then found three other birders and together with Dr. Tramer, they agreed to serve as members of the newly formed Ohio Cardinal Records Committee. The difference in names was meant to signify that this committee was to aid the editors of the OHIO CARDINAL only and had no function concerning the state list. I attempted to make the representation regional and for example, selected the Cincinnati representative based on the recommendations of prominent birders in the area. I know each of them as respected, honest men serving at an obviously thankless job. They are trying to do the best job they possibly can with the written documentation in front of them. Obviously, you have different opinions than some of them on certain birds. That alone, of course, does not make you right. Records committees all over the United States regularly register dissenting or split votes. Experts have been known to disagree.

My offer to you, Mary, is this: Rather than the negative approach of withholding your observations, why not accept this invitation to join our Records Committee and help us in this positive manner.

Sir,

I wish to correct some of the misinformation in Ed Pierce's article on Ohio's first Northern Wheatear. His assertion that the bird was an adult male is inaccurate. In fact, the only age and sex class positively eliminated by the bird's plumage is adult male. In basic (winter) plumage, adult male Northern wheatears have a pure white superciliary and sharply defined pure black ear coverts. Color photographs of this wheatear clearly show a buffy superciliary and dusky gray-black ear coverts typical of females or immature males in basic plumage. Since the bird's measurements were ambiguous and mouth color was not noted, the age and sex of this wheatear will never be conclusively established.

Secondly, racial determination of Northern wheatears has never been based of the color of upperparts and ear coverts. In fact, their racial identification is a complex matter and may only be completely resolved through comparison with a series of specimens. While the Greenland race tends to be larger with more brightly colored underparts, there is much overlap between this and the nominate race. Photographs of the Ohio wheatear have been sent to several European experts for their comments. The comments received to date have been far more cautious than Mr. Pierce's wishful thinking. The Ohio wheatear may exhibit some characteristics of the Greenland race but the photos and measurements appear to be inadequate to positively establish the race of this individual.

Finally, this article gives the impression that separation of Northern wheatears from other similar wheatears is only based on measurements obtained in the hand. In fact, all wheatears can be positively identified in the field, given careful study under favorable conditions. For observers interested in learning more about the identification of this challenging group, I recommend the excellent articles by Peter Clements in British Birds (1987: 80[4]: 137-157 and 80[5]: 187-238).

Bruce Peterjohn
Westerville, Ohio

Ed Pierce responds:

As I sit here looking at a copy of the photograph of the Northern wheatear that appeared on the cover of Vol. 1, No. 2, my untrained eye still sees a white superciliary that is every bit as white as the white feathers in the tail of the bird. There may be some brown or grey to the tip of the superciliary as it extends into the nape of the bird, but that part of it which is directly above the eye is certainly pure white. Again, looking at the photograph, the ear coverts directly behind the eye are black. There are also some black radiating lines directly beneath the eye of the bird. At the end of these black ear coverts, I see small areas of brown before the over all light grey of the nape begins. To me, these areas can be seen on the cover of the magazine. On the cover directly behind the eye is the black area and directly below the eye are the black radiating lines. Directly behind these black areas is a lighter colored dark area which appears to me to be brown in the photograph. I agree that the ear coverts are not "sharply defined pure black" but they are not "dusky grey-black" either.

As I stated in my article, I used Witherby's (The Handbook of British Birds, H.F. Witherby, Vol. 2, Witherby Ltd., London, Pgs. 145-150, 1943) plumage descriptions to identify age and sex. He states that the adult male in winter plumage has black ear coverts tipped in brown and the adult female in winter plumage has brown ear coverts and both sexes in juvenile plumage have buff ear coverts edged and tipped in brown. As for the superciliary stripe, Witherby states that the adult male in winter plumage is white and the adult female in winter plumage is pale cream and in both sexes in the juvenile plumage there is a slight indication of a creamy eye stripe. In addition, Witherby states that the adult female in winter plumage and both sexes in juvenile plumage have tail feathers, wing feathers, and greater coverts that are dark brown and not black. As I look at the photograph in front of me of the Northern wheatear in question, these feathers certainly look black.

These plumage descriptions led me to only one conclusion and that was that this bird was an adult male in winter plumage. As I clearly stated in my article, this was a "guess" on my part. I am not an ornithologist and this is the only wheatear I have ever seen. My article was not intended to be the last word on this subject.

As to racial determination, again, Witherby states that the Greenland race is "like adult male of typical form" (Yukon or European race) "but rather browner and less grey upper parts, ear coverts usually browner, less black, throat and breast sometimes deeper buff, but this is variable." To me, this means that plumage characteristics are important in racial determination and I gather that even the European experts say that the Ohio wheatear may exhibit some such characteristics of the Greenland race. I think it would be interesting for our subscribers to read the comments of these European experts. I hope Bruce will send them to the magazine so that we can print them in their entirety.