

DOCUMENTATION FOR RARE BIRD RECORDS

By Bill Whan

Rare strays are more than merely the spice of recreational birding; for enthusiasts they often provide its greatest rewards. Probably nothing pleases the listing crowd more than the discovery of a species genuinely rare—or best of all, previously unknown—showing up in their territory. Scientists, on the other hand, tend to be less intrigued with birds that for obscure reasons show up far out of range. Such unlikely events are usually regarded as “accidentals,” and of minor biological importance. As an example, here are a couple of informal communications (some typos corrected) which Milton Trautman, curator of the bird collection at the OSU Museum, sent to his friend Karl Maslowski, the distinguished Cincinnati naturalist, in the spring of 1969. Maslowski had invited Dr. Trautman to drive down to Cincinnati to observe a Black-headed Grosbeak present near the former’s home, a record Peterjohn [2001, p. 524] was later to call “indisputable” based on Maslowski’s photos. Trautman wrote:

Thank you for notifying me of the Black-headed Grosbeak at Milford, Ohio. The record will be placed in the rapidly expanding “fictional” list.

I will not take time to see it because it cannot be established as a factual record without collecting and I have seen many Black-headed Grosbeaks in the west. Accidentals actually mean very little; their real scientific interest lies in why or how they reached Ohio, by being wind-blown or through directional loss; in other words by either physical or mental deficiencies or both. There is little doubt in my mind that during the past 12,000 years every species of eastern North American birds and most western North American species have been present and unobserved in Ohio at some time.

My not accepting photographic proof is because even the actual specimen that is collected can be misidentified. A good example is the frequently published record of the Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*), collected 19 February 1909 in Ashtabula County. This was accepted by the AOU and everyone else as the only authentic Ohio record until the Oberlin collection, which housed it for almost

60 years, was incorporated in the Ohio State collections. Then we discovered it is a Red-throated Loon...The excellent photograph of the Rufous-necked Sandpiper (*Erolia ruficollis*) [now called Red-necked Stint, *Calidris ruficollis*] seen in September in Ashtabula County is a fine photograph of a spring plumaged (in fall!) Rufous-necked. I have seen several Rufous-neckeds in Ohio stained with oil or iron oxide. By July in Alaska a third of the Rufous-necks which I saw had lost their rufous coloration and looked like Least Sandpipers; what would they have looked like in September! I was given a beautiful photograph of a Long-billed Dowitcher which I collected immediately after the picture was taken. The skin is unquestionably a Long-bill, the picture unquestionably a Short-bill because of the slight angle at which the head was taken...The life of a scientist or a Curator is not a popular or a happy one.

Such were the off-the-cuff comments of Ohio’s most prominent ornithologist of the time. (It seems Trautman erred, as the Red-necked Stint was photographed not in Sep, but on 21 Jul 1962, so its plumage in the photo was appropriate.) Maslowski must have continued the conversation, as Trautman was to write to him again ten days later on 01 May 1969:

I agree with you that a group of ornithologists may decide that your picture is of a Black-headed Grosbeak, although the winter plumaged or female Rose-breasted Grosbeak is so similar to each other, and to your picture, that we have had a Rose-breasted, collected in 1882 and labelled as a Black-headed in our collection until I recently worked over specimens and caught the mistake. Xanthism is strong in both species and I have some female Rose-breasted as yellowish as are some Black-headed.

Because of the marked similarity of the winter birds, and the birder’s concept of a rose-breasted bird, we get sight records of Black-headed Grosbeaks in Ohio almost annually. Your record would be at least the second published sight record for Ohio (possibly as much as much as the 5th). One that comes to mind is in

Louis Campbell's 1968 *Birds of the Toledo Area* (*The Blade*, p. 278). I quote: "An immature male (?) Black-headed Grosbeak was seen in Sylvania, Ohio, on March 3 and 15, 1965, at a feeding station operated by Mr. and Mrs. William Wood... Both observers examined it at a distance of 10 feet as it fed upon cracked corn. The Woods are acquainted with Rose-breasted and Evening Grosbeaks."

Suppose we accept Wood's record as the first Black-headed record for Ohio (I'm sure I could find others published previously) or yours on the strength of the photo, where do we stop? Do we accept everyone's identification? Suppose I sent a picture of a bird to 33 ornithologists, 17 of whom believed it to be a species "new" for Ohio and 16 did not, should we take a flier and accept the majority vote? That is not factual science.

I have taken up a new and unscientific hobby, a "fictional" list of sight records of "new" species seen in Ohio. All sight records are accepted which have been published in newspapers, local and state lists, etc. It's just started and contains some beauties but has only 61 species listed so far. I can get over a hundred easily and if the "records" keep coming in at the present rate it won't be many years before the "fictional" surpasses our "factual". Any you hear of, please let me know.

Undeterred, Maslowski—who himself was hardly averse to collecting bird specimens, and might have still have assumed Trautman might want to see a live bird rather than a dead one—called Trautman again eight months later, inviting him to come see a Green-tailed Towhee in his neighborhood. On 01 May Trautman wrote to say he might come by, and bring a photographer. He mentioned a male Green-tailed Towhee that seven years earlier had come to a feeder within half a mile of his home, staying nearly five months. If it was ever photographed or carefully described, Peterjohn (2001:480) was unable to find the evidence. Trautman felt the only explanation for its appearance was a "lack of directional sense," and went on to explain why he and his wife had not included it in their respected *Annotated List of the Birds of Ohio* published just the year before, now online at https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/5415/V68N05_257.pdf?sequence=1 because it had not been collected and curated in an accredited museum, asserting (p. 238) that "if one sight re-

cord is accepted then in justice all sight records must be accepted," without explaining this curious assertion. He asked Maslowski, in the event the bird died, to send him the specimen, saying in a joshing way it was "about time" that Cincinnati provided a new species for the official Ohio list. OSUM has ten specimens of this species, none from Ohio.

Trautman's assertions seem all the more doctrinaire today, given the number and excellence of modern photographic records, growth in the numbers of careful observers, and the contributions of bird banders (who are able to take critical data from living birds; several species have been added to the Ohio list in this way). DNA and other analytical evidence can pinpoint identifications without collecting specimens. Consider Ohio's first occurrence of the increasingly wide-roaming and unmistakable Crested Caracara, well verified by camera-toting tourists last year. In view of his statements about the misidentified specimen of the "Arctic Loon" from 1909, even Trautman might have been intrigued by the decisive evidence provided for the unprecedented occurrence of a genuine Arctic Loon, seen by many and fortuitously well photographed by a few, in central Ohio in late Oct of 2014. Still, his remarks on these occurrences, if he were around today, are likely to have been as skeptical as those he conveyed to Maslowski for the Cincinnati rarities. Both birds could easily have been collected as voucher specimens, but how much will our knowledge suffer as a result since they were not? Of course, the bird could have been an escaped captive, but a specimen may not have had evidence of this.

Of course museum specimens help to confirm knowledge about bird occurrences in years gone by, as well as providing important biological data. It is true that a teaching collection would benefit from unusual specimens. Most of the state's museums have done an excellent job in curating specimens, but the records of their holdings are not always easy for the public to consult. In the nineteenth century many species were more numerous, but strays reported—even by experts of the time—are difficult to confirm without specimen evidence, especially given the primitive conditions of photography and field optics during those days, not to mention a disinclination to describe carefully their features in the field. Observers relied on illustrations by Wilson and Audubon, but to confirm identifications they often referred to detailed diagnostic measurements supplied in resources such as Coues's *Key to North American Birds* (first edition in 1872). This of course required a corpse for the purpose. The

last edition of the *Key* in 1903 ran to two quarto volumes and 1152 pages, and weighed nearly ten pounds, demanding that birds be brought to it, rather than vice versa.

Unfortunately, too many of Ohio's interesting old specimens reported to have been collected cannot now be located, and descriptions of these birds from long ago are seldom more than scanty. It is frustrating that the older Ohio observers repeatedly reported seeing—and collecting—rare species such as Gull-billed and Roseate terns here, but offered very little by way of description, and as the specimens they reported are lost, these terns cannot be recognized as having occurred in Ohio. As for the far more common Caspian Tern, Wheaton's lengthy work on Ohio birds does not even mention it for Ohio, and OSU has no nineteenth-century specimen from the state. Jones 1903 (p. 17) calls it "a summer straggler" and "probably a wanderer from the south" (though it breeds to our north); Peterjohn (2001:242) attributes such low estimations to the depredations of the feather trade. Trautman offers a useful brief overview of Ohio's terns in his *Birds of Western Lake Erie* (2006:177-8).

All the skilled illustrators of field guides have spent many hours among the millions of study specimens available in museums; their having done so has made it easier for observers to identify and understand birds accurately without killing their first. And even observers who lack familiarity with unusual birds may nonetheless provide valuable first-hand information—photographs are only one obvious example—to help validate identifications. We may wonder if Trautman risked diminishing our collective knowledge about Ohio's birds by insisting that specimens alone verify their presence here, as consulting museum collections was easy for him, but quite a task for the average person.

Trautman really did keep "fictional" and "factual" lists of birds reported in Ohio; he maintained files of both in his office, and they rigidly guided his choice of species for his *Annotated List of the Birds of Ohio*. He had, for example, twice published having seen a long-billed curlew with other observers in *Delaware* in Trautman (1940:241), without collecting it or adding it to his published Ohio species lists. Some of his friends tested his principles in 1960, when they played a prank on him. Here follows an account Tom Thomson wrote about it, courtesy of Columbus's *Short North Gazette*, in the issue for April 2004:

From time to time, his bird collecting activities proved to be a sore point among many of his associates and birders. This

was especially true when a really rare bird just upped and disappeared before many people had a chance to see it. This happened a lot, and as people became more environmentally aware, a lot of rare bird sightings were never widely reported for fear they would fall prey to Milt's shotgun.

I can't resist telling this one story about Milt. Back in 1960, several of his birding buddies were on their way home from a trip to the Rocky Mountains when they stopped to examine a black-billed magpie that had been killed by a car.

The specimen was in good condition, so they kept it. Not many miles down the road they stopped in a small town where they were able to purchase a supply of dry ice. They put the magpie in a paper sack with the dry ice and continued on their merry way. Somewhere between eastern Colorado and Ohio, they hatched a nefarious plot, which I have always called the Great Magpie Caper.

Hours before arriving home they took the dead magpie out of the sack so it would thaw. Then, they drove quietly by Milt's house, tossed the dead bird in his driveway and sped away, barely able to contain their mirth.

You can guess what happened next. Milt found the bird, considered it a legitimate stray that had accidentally wandered into Ohio, skinned it, attached a label to it, deposited it in the state collection and included the record in his and Mary's *Annotated List of the Birds of Ohio*. You can find it there today under "Accidentals or Very Irregular Visitors." Very irregular, I would say.

Mary passed away in 1986; Milt died in 1991. I don't think he ever knew the truth about the magpie. But if he had, I can almost hear his high-pitched scratchy voice excitedly declaring "Well, that's one of the dumbest things I ever heard!"

True to his principles, Trautman later saw a live magpie in northwest Ohio in 1964 while in the distinguished company of Irv Kassoy and Lou Campbell (*Toledo Naturalists' Association Yearbook*, Vol. 20), but never mentioned this living bird in his *Annotated Checklist* of 1968 (p. 316). As for the prank magpie specimen he recorded in Columbus, the tag attached to OSUM #12523 reads: "Found by M.B.T. at 6:30 am, run over in front of his driveway. Was not there at dark the previous evening. Found at 6:30 am. Blood of

bird and bird stuck to street. Dew on feathers.” Some have speculated that Thomson may have been among the anonymous birding buddies he mentions, but this seems unlikely. For one thing, he wrote that “the specimen was in good condition,” but an in-hand look at the bird shows it had been flattened and torn, and Trautman had laboriously sewn the skin together to restore it. Besides, everyone knew Tom had the better sense of humor.

Sources cited:

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Columbus birder and former Cardinal editor Bill Whan adds another chapter to his ongoing accounts of Ohio's avian history.