

Regional reports . . . have they any scientific value?

A foreword to Special Publication No. 1, Florida Ornithological Society, 1978: Species Index to Florida Bird Records in Audubon Field Notes and American Birds Volumes 1–30, 1947–1976, by Margaret Coon Bowman.

by William B. Robertson, Jr.

Margaret Bowman's 30-year Species Index to Florida Bird Records in AFN/AB is, quite naturally, a boon to anyone interested in Florida ornithology. More than that, it is of vital importance to many other researchers such as those investigating: introduction and spread of exotics; the relation between weather patterns and occurrence of accidental records; cyclic invasions; or changes in abundance or distribution of any given species.

William Robertson's Foreword takes a penetrating look at the validity of the 25,000 bird sightings summarized in this index, and at the scientific value of AFN/AB to Florida ornithology. I encourage every contributor to AB as well as those who use the regional reports to read this Foreword. Dr Robertson concludes that AFN/AB reports have "changed previous concepts of the occurrence of most of the species on the state list" and that without this journal effects of intense environmental disturbances would be almost unrecorded. These statements are a tribute to the foresight of the National Audubon Society in supporting the publication of American Birds, and to the team of Regional Editors, contributors and subscribers who work together to make the program such a success.

— Chandler S. Robbins

About four years ago, in the second number of the newly fledged *Florida Field Naturalist*, I suggested that it would be a great service to field ornithology in Florida for someone to index the massive accumulation of bird records in the *Audubon Field Notes/American Birds* regional reports. The suggestion was a forlorn hope at best. It seemed foolish to imagine that anyone would volunteer for such a tedious and demanding task. The volunteer appeared a few weeks later, however, when Maggy Bowman wrote to say that she'd like to try her hand at the index, ". . . if the job hasn't already been claimed". Discussions of format and scope of coverage and search for the scarce early issues of *Audubon Field Notes* soon followed and Maggy went to work. With a truly admirable

tenacity and skill she kept at what must often have seemed a dreary, niggling, endless labor. The product is before you. It is easily the Florida Ornithological Society's most important contribution to date.

This index is fated to be taken for granted. It will quickly become part of the standard furnishings of the Florida bird student's tool kit. Thus, while we still remember, it seems timely to consider the way things were before the index. *Audubon Field Notes* was founded in 1947. Over the past quarter century or so, it (and its successor, *American Birds*) has published at least 75 percent of all the records of birds in Florida that were put into print. Only a relative handful, and not always the most significant, were documented elsewhere in

more detail. For better or worse, information available only in *AFN/AB* makes up the bulk of the recent record of Florida birds. The information became less and less accessible, however, as the unindexed mass of material increased ultimately to more than 200 separate articles. Small wonder that observers and authors (even *AFN/AB* regional editors) sometimes relied on memory, rather than search by brute force through hundreds of densely printed pages. Inevitably, data were overlooked or misquoted and various errors took root in the literature and flourished. It is said that those who pay too little attention to their history will repeat it and the point surely applies in field sciences such as faunistic ornithology. I seem to recall, for example, at least three "first" Western Tanager specimens for Florida. Such mistakes are innocuous individually, but, as they multiply and are compounded and sanctified by repetition, they tend to subvert the entire historical record. By unlocking *AFN/AB* this index makes sound scholarship in Florida field ornithology immensely easier than it has been for several decades.

The index covers all Florida bird records published in the regional reports of the first 30 volumes of *AFN/AB*. The material indexed includes: the first eight of Francis M. Weston's classic series of reports from the "Pensacola (Florida) Region" which began in the 1924 volume of *Bird-Lore*; 112 "Central Southern Region" reports covering the Florida panhandle west of the Apalachicola River; and, 110 "Florida Region" reports. Only bird species names are indexed. Early thoughts of indexing by subject under each species were given up in the interest of keeping the index within reasonable size. The only important question about an index is, can it be used with confidence? The answer here is an emphatic, Yes! Extensive checking encourages me to believe that the roughly 25,000 volume and page references are exceptionally accurate and complete.

Readers are seldom tempted to curl up with a good index, but this index will repay a little attention for its own sake. Even the most knowledgeable student is likely to discover records he wasn't aware of or had forgotten. Note, however, that a few rather startling entries (Vaux's Swift, Yucatan Vireo, MacGil-

livray's Warbler, House Finch) are there because the names are mentioned in discussing records of other species, not because the birds are reported to have occurred in Florida. The mere sequence of volume numbers tells a lot about the Florida history of species with expanding ranges, such as the Cattle Egret, Fulvous Whistling-Duck and Smooth-billed Ani, and about occasional invaders, such as the Evening Grosbeak. The length of the entries is a sort of histogram of the relative importance of species in the recent avifaunal record of Florida as seen, of course, in the somewhat distorting mirror of *AFN/AB* where semi-rarities and conspicuous migrants tend to claim the most space.

Publication of the index is an appropriate occasion, and 30 volumes should be an adequate sample, for a brief appraisal of the scientific worth of *AFN/AB* to Florida ornithology. The social values of the journal would seem to be beyond dispute, but the question of its scientific value has provoked continual soul-searching and debate. Ornithologists' comments have ranged from mild complaint about the need for more rigorous editing to rock-ribbed Tory assertions that *AFN/AB* was just an entertainment for bird watchers and irrelevant to scientific ornithology. Although similar essays on current bird records from various parts of the country had been published in *Bird-Lore* and *Audubon Magazine* for nearly 40 years, acute professional unease about the material dates from about 1950 when the *Audubon Field Notes* regional reports emerged in approximately their present form. Mr. Weston's reports from Pensacola belong to the earlier era. They dealt with birds seen by the editor and a few close associates within a small area and details of most records of more than passing interest were promptly published in other bird journals. The new style of regional report differed in several ways that were unsettling. The much larger regions and journalistic pace of production made tight editorial surveillance virtually impossible. And, most importantly, the new regional reports put in print large numbers of records by avocational observers who seldom published a more complete account of any record, however unusual. It is not surprising that some saw the ruin of faunistic ornithology in this

spate of observations made by unknown, and presumably undisciplined, people and published inelegantly, in haste and with sparse documentation by *AFN/AB*.

The curious thing is that the predicted disaster did not happen. Almost every dire apprehension that professionals (and not only the elitists) had about *AFN/AB* turned out to be justified in some degree. But, across 30 years, it has not made much difference. Perhaps the patch is not as tidy as it was in Howell's day, but time still weeds it fairly well. In Florida at least, scientific field ornithology survives; the truth about bird occurrence in the state hasn't been lost in a morass of bad records. This result can be credited in part to countless feats of heroic discrimination by regional editors and in part to the adaptive evolution of the *AFN/AB* regional reports. Unusual occurrences now tend to be reported with some circumstantial detail beyond the bare statement of where, when and by whom the bird allegedly was seen. It is not uncommon to find mention of specimens and where they are deposited. Photographs documenting exceptional records (nesting frigatebirds, Caribbean Coot, Antillean Palm Swift, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Harris' Sparrow) are often published with the reports. At the cost of introducing some temporary clutter into the record *AFN/AB* has provided thousands of bits of reliable information about Florida birds most of which would otherwise not have been recorded. In sum, this material has changed previous concepts of the occurrence of most of the species on the state list. Such argument about the worth of *AFN/AB* as still persists merely rakes old ashes. There is not much fire left in it.

The journal makes its most significant contribution, however, not by publishing individual bird records but by preserving a record of large-scale phenomena that are not readily amenable to more formal ornithological study. Reports from the wide net of observers permit analysis, however imperfect, of events that affect large areas and of trends of change that occur over long periods of time. Except for *AFN/AB* the effects upon bird life of the intense environmental disturbances that are ecologically dominant in much of Florida (hurricanes, severe freezes, severe drought, etc.)

would be almost unrecorded. Similarly, understanding of such facets of Florida ornithology as the history of breeding range extensions, the occurrence and spread of naturalized exotics, the pattern of major fall-outs of migrants, and the status of threatened populations rests heavily upon information published in *AFN/AB*.

But, in concluding that *AFN/AB* has contributed substantially to ornithological science in Florida, one must also note that ample room exists for improving the regional reports. The improvement must come in large part from the observers who contribute bird records. A colleague who once edited a regional report told me that when the job was done he felt slightly soiled. I know exactly what he meant. It's hard to believe that anything worthwhile could be composed from notes scribbled on old envelopes and cocktail napkins. A contributor's first job is to submit his material in a form that encourages a little confidence on the part of the regional editor. His second job is to publish full details of unusual records in a journal that is less cramped for space than *AFN/AB Florida Field Naturalist* is waiting for the manuscript. As a final point, although stress on records of rarities is doubtless inevitable, the regional reports need to pay more attention to common birds. Some recent trend in this direction can be seen, but it seems a bit out of balance, for example, that the index shows more than twice as many entries for the Yellow-headed Blackbird as it does for the Red-winged Blackbird. Observers need especially to note apparent changes in abundance and species expected but *not* seen. Several land birds once widespread in the state (American Kestrel, Hairy Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch) now have declining populations and shrinking ranges. Other common species may follow this pattern unnoticed unless the information is recorded in the regional reports.

Despite its vagaries of emphasis and its occasional lapses, *AFN/AB* has become an accepted part of the ornithological scene in Florida. Here is an index which makes it easy to review and use the information that the journal published in its first 30 years. — *South Florida Research Center, U.S. National Park Service, Everglades National Park, Homestead, Florida 33030.*