

ing of raptor biology and their ultimate relevance to conservation of North American hawk populations.

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**CHARLES H. BLAKE**

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Charles H. Blake, who served *American Birds* as editor of Christmas Bird Counts from the West Indies, and in many other ways, died on December 6, 1981, at the age of 80. "Charlie," a most genial and admirable man, was born in Berkeley, California, and received his bachelor's and doctoral degrees in zoology at M.I.T., where he served on the faculty for 32 years. A former president of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association, and of the Chapel Hill Bird Club, he was an Elective Member of the A.O.U., and a Fellow of the A.A.A.S. His interests, in addition to ornithology, were museums and historical societies, and he served on the boards of several of them. He kept a keen and watchful eye on our editorial content, as critic, referee, and friend. We note his passing with great regret.

## Communications

April 15, 1980

To the editor:

Bird banding has one advantage and that is the bander must keep records of individual birds so he tends to have exact dates and accurate identifications. I went back over my records recently, looking for gaps in the capture [at Hillsborough, near Durham, N.C.] of supposedly rather common species and I came up with the following tabulation:

Eastern Kingbird—Aug. '64-June '78, no captures.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher—last Sept. '70.  
White-breasted Nuthatch—Feb. '69-Jan. '80, no captures; occasionally heard or seen.

Bewick's Wren—last Oct. '69.

Loggerhead Shrike—Feb. '72-Nov. '77, no captures and none since.

Yellow-throated Vireo—July '69-Apr. '76, no captures and none since.

Tennessee Warbler—Sept. '69-Oct. '77 no captures.

Black-throated Green Warbler—only Sept. '65.

Blackburnian Warbler—two captures May '69 and Sept. '78.

Grasshopper Sparrow—last Oct. '62.

Savannah Sparrow—last Dec. '71.



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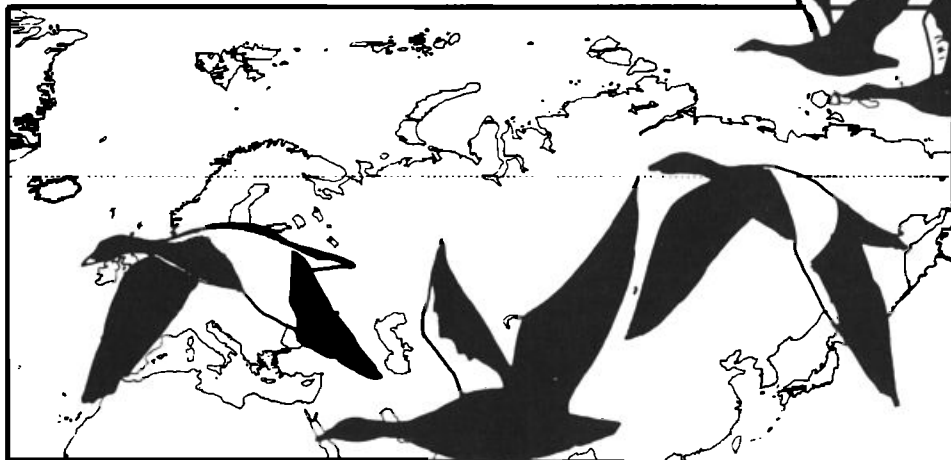
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In most of these cases it has been evident that the birds are unduly scarce or perhaps completely wanting. The absence of captures have not in any of these cases been caused by any changes in my banding set-up. I particularly call attention to Bewick's Wren and the Grasshopper Sparrow.

Charles H. Blake

To the Editor:

We are belatedly responding to the critique of Clark and Dunne (AB 33: 309) of our article on Accipiter identification (AB 33:236-240) because of queries from colleagues about a statement made by Dunn (Auk 98:641-644). In his review of R. T. Peterson's *Field Guide*

to the Birds, fourth edition, Dunn claims that our paper "is a work of dubious value that was later partially discredited". He can only be referring to Clark and Dunne, who assert: "We feel that this article has little to do with field (emphasis in the original) identification of North American Accipiters, has little to do with in-hand identification of North American Accipiters, and contains some incorrect or misleading information".

The obvious purpose of our article was to point out the difficulties involved in identifying species in the genus, while Clark and Dunne imply that identification is easy and can be accomplished by using "field marks and a method of elimination". We have seen this system used, and it leads to frequent misidentifications.

We will first examine what Clark and Dunne claim are "errors" in our article. We stated that "Adult male Sharp-shinned have caps fully as dark as adult male Cooper's". Clark and Dunne state: "We certainly noted no sex differences (our emphasis) in the caps of museum specimens, photographs, or live adult Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawks". We ask the reader to view the lower of the three photographs of their letter. In the male Sharp-shinned, the cap is clearly darker than the back but there is no difference in cap and back color in the female. Perhaps Clark and Dunne should have selected a better photograph. We see no reason to retract our statement that males have darker caps than females both in Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, and we are unimpressed with their qualifier that there is a line of high contrast

between cap and back on Cooper's.

Clark and Dunne state that we are incorrect in criticizing the use of relative head size in differentiating between Cooper's and Sharp-shinned. Their top photograph shows a male Cooper's with an (apparently) relatively much larger head than the adjacent Sharp-shinned. However, if one looks at the photograph in the middle, there is very little difference between the relative head size of the male Cooper's and female Sharp-shinned depicted. In this case, Clark and Dunne selected the correct photograph to establish their point, but made the error of selecting another photograph which disputes their conclusions. The apparent head size of birds is, in large part, a function of how they hold the feathers of their head and neck. We have noted differences between species in the hand, but no consistent differences in the field. Clark and Dunne regard this as a "field mark". We quote them: "What is a field mark but an aid to identification." We say an aid to identification is something which may help, sometimes. Field marks, according to Peterson (*Field Guide To The Birds, fourth edition, 1980*), . . . . "are in effect the trade marks of nature." We submit that an indistinct and variable characteristic is not a "field mark!"

Clark and Dunne attempt to contradict our assertion that tail-shape is often an unreliable character for distinguishing Cooper's from Sharp-shinned. Again, we need only to refer to their photographs to show their naiveté. They use their center photograph to establish the difference between Cooper's and Sharp

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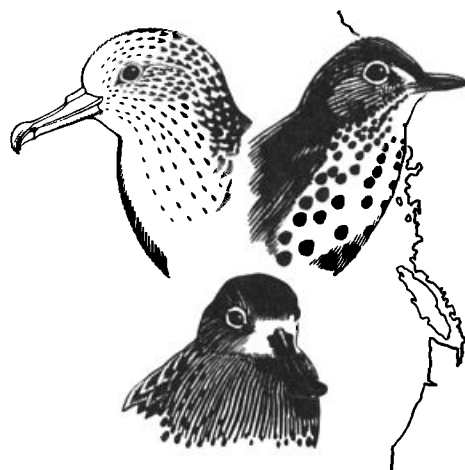
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shinneds The Cooper's is shown with a partly fanned, and therefore, rounded tail; the Sharp-shinned is not only shown with a folded tail, but the bird is held at a slight angle which serves to emphasize the (apparently) "square tail". A better comparison might be made between the Cooper's of their center photograph with the female Sharp-shinned of their bottom photograph, which has its tail spread approximately as much as the Coopers; both have similarly rounded tails. In the selection of tails in our article, we chose those which led to incorrect identifications; we leave the reader to judge what motivated Clark and Dunne in their choice of photographs. We heartily concur with Clark and Dunne that our illustrations of tails are "useless for any kind of identification"—that was precisely our purpose!

Clark and Dunne note that we "neglected to mention a very good field mark, the thickness of the white bar of the tip of the tail (much thicker in Cooper's)". We have examined a number of museum specimens and live birds and agree that the white terminal band (not including the contiguous light gray or light brown band) is, on the average, relatively wider in Cooper's than in Sharp-shinneds. However, there is considerable individual variation, and this relative character is no more than an aid to identification. Further, we find this character to be of some utility only if one gets an excellent look at the top of a tail that is at least partially spread (the white terminal band is not visible on the underside).

Clark and Dunne dismiss our contention that weight is one of better measurements of size in birds. Permit us to expand on this contention. The standard measurements taken on birds are wing chord, tail length and weight. Of these, weight is the most valuable, but mean weight and standard deviation give a better appreciation of average body size and variation than wing chord or tail length. For the birdwatcher, wing span or body length might be more useful but very few measurements of these are available and for good reason: they are difficult to measure accurately. We did not list separate weights for the sexes of the common roadside birds in our figures because of space restrictions and because only the Common Grackle shows appreciable sexual dimorphism.

We are dismayed that two professionals, Clark and Dunne, persist in teaching methods of identification, which, we have demonstrated, will result in 25% error when used by experienced ornithologists. Apparently Clark and Dunne regard an error of 25% (or more, in less experienced observers) as successful identification. We hope that most hawk watchers have higher standards.

—Helmut C. Mueller, Department of Zoology and Curriculum in Ecology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Daniel D. Berger and George Allez, Cedar Grove Ornithological Section, Cedar Grove, Wisconsin.

with clear line and easily raised about a foot above the nest. When the photo session was over the line was removed and the branch returned to its original position completely concealing the nest.

If other photographers cared as I do they would never use flash. I never trap birds and throw them into a box to be frozen by flash, their eyes damaged by instant flashes of light.

I observe the greatest care and attention in maintaining the integrity of the nest site. I look for nests that are easy to photograph and I reject ten for every one I consider. Yes, a good photo is important, but as any photographer who strives for excellence knows, an altered scene with clipped grass or vegetation satisfies neither subject nor photographer.

—Gary Meszaros

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To the editor:

When the January 1982 edition arrived with that spectacular cover photo of a Willow Flycatcher on the nest, the caption stated it was taken "with available light". Would that it were. It appears to me that the nest site was considerably altered to provide not only light, but an unobstructed view as well. Unless I am mistaken one can observe a neatly severed twig just below the bird's wing tip. Less than an inch to its left at least two petioles of a leaf cluster have been clipped close to their bases, and only one leaf of the cluster remains. There might be another cut just under the base of the bird's tail, and the twig above the bird's head shows a couple of light spots that look suspicious.

If the nest site was altered as I have observed, it would expose the parent and nestlings to the gaze of a merciless July sun, and any predator that happened by.

Most nature photographers with whom I am familiar are scrupulously concerned with the welfare of their subjects, but I am sure there are still many to whom the picture comes first and the welfare of the organism be damned. Publication of their work would encourage this attitude; one which I am sure the Audubon Society abhors.

Edward D. Treacy

To the editor:

In regards to the Willow Flycatcher photo on the nest on the January 1982 cover of *American Birds*, I personally saw both young flycatchers fledge. There was a second branch directly over the nest. This was tied

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CI 160

The following letter, written to *American Birds* on August 8, 1980, in response to an editorial query about whether *American Birds* should eliminate observer initials, although long delayed, is pertinent today. A number of letters, both pro and con, are in our files, and we will publish others as space permits.

To the editor:

I've just read "The Last Word" in the May, 1980 issue of *American Birds* and am particularly interested in the paragraphs dealing with whether or not to continue publishing names of contributors.

As one of those connections with *Ameri-*

*can Birds* (and its forerunner, *Audubon Field Notes*) reach back almost into antiquity, and include roles of subscriber, contributor, reader and admirer, I feel both duty-bound and somewhat qualified to express a few thoughts regarding the possible elimination of birders' names.

Over these many years, your publication has achieved a balance of combining the amateur and the scientific sides of birding which no other work has ever been able to accomplish. Several other periodicals have come to press, tempted the insatiable appetites of the birding public, but then have fallen short of perceiving what it is that keeps the millions (yes, now millions) of amateur birders and the thousands of professionals more or less in tune.

The birding public is a society. We want to reach out to each other—not just to the next town, or to the next typha marsh—but all the way—from Kinnebunkport to Walla Walla. We want to be a part of a whole thing. We need to know who is doing what with whom and where. It makes us tick. It also provides the motivation that has, over the decades, produced the dilemma you now face—mountains of data that are becoming almost unmanageable.

The positive effect achieved by identifying observers' names is that it helps birders to keep track of each other. Much has been said of the ego effect of seeing one's name in print. This we suggest, is a myth. We submit that a poll of all Regional Editors will reveal that complaints of missing names do not constitute a significant problem. Those who contribute regularly, we contend, soon get out of the habit of even looking for their own names.

What do we look for upon receipt of a new issue of *American Birds*? First, of course, the highlights among birding observations. But, almost as important is a perusal of the names. So, John Keenleyside was in on the Green Sandpiper sighting in Alaska. Trust that son-of-a-gun to be there! Nice to see Bill Harrison still birding strong around Nogales, Arizona. Dan Gibson certainly does a fine job from Alaska.

Eliminate names from *American Birds* and what have you left? One more periodical catering only to the professionals. There is a trend now to downplay the non-scientific and cater to the dyed-in-the-wool hierarchy. Many naturalists' organizations are gradually phasing into merely Environmentalist Groups. Vive les environmentalists! But,

they belong in Ratepayers and Concerned Citizens' Groups. Similarly, the professional ornithologists. They have their *Auk* plus endless other excellent publications that also deserve high praise. So, they are well served.

The proposal of using initials, cross-referenced to an annual identification list is a cop-out compromise that may well create more work than it cuts out. The year-end list has to be compiled by somebody and, now, the editors must all watch never to use the same initials for two observers in the same calendar year. Yecch!

It has been pointed out that *British Birds* has eliminated names completely. Well that's their problem.

So, we come back to the problem of handling ever-increasing data and keeping the final result affordable. Undoubtedly, economics are the real problem. In fact, likely the only problem. Our guess is that very few subscribers to *American Birds* buy it because of price. They buy because of quality. The answer, then, is not to water down the contents. It is to get the message across that if birders want to be a part of the most informative, the most comprehensive and newsiest parcel of information that has ever been compiled on North American birds, and that is consistently available at a reasonable price, they have to expect to pay accordingly. Admittedly, this is over-simplifying your cost-conscious managers' dilemma but, in our opinion, it is the answer.

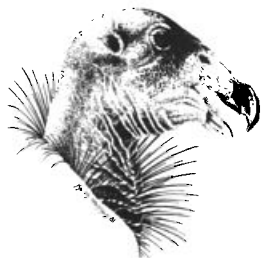
The answer, certainly, is not to take away one of the prime ingredients of your product formula.

—Gerry Bennett

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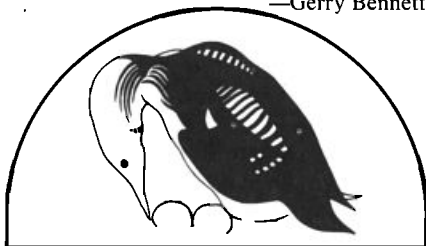
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