

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

It has taken me many starts and stops over the last year to articulate the following expression of my dissatisfaction with the treatment of the Massachusetts "Cox's" sandpiper by *American Birds* (Kasprzyk, Forster, and Harrington 1987, *Am. Birds* 41:1359-1364; Vickery, Finch, and Donohue 1987, *Am. Birds* 41:1366-1369), a dissatisfaction that stems, I know, from my high hopes and expectations for the direction of *American Birds*.

I must begin by saying that I believe it was thoroughly irresponsible for *American Birds* to publish these papers under titles denoting that a positive identification was involved. In part because *Calidris paramelanotos* (Parker 1982, *S. Austr. Nat.* 56[4]:63) is known to science only from two nonbreeding-plumaged adult specimens, and as you well know, it is debated if the bird is in fact a species. But instead of presenting with caution—a caution certainly dictated by what is *not* known about "Cox's" sandpiper—the interesting possibilities of this sighting, *American Birds*

vaulted circumspection and dived headlong into print to elaborately document . . . what? . . . a northeastern U.S. sighting of a certainly intriguing, but to this date unidentified and unidentifiable, sandpiper that got away! To publish a description of "a hitherto undescribed plumage" based on a lone bird of uncertain lineage that was not preserved for subsequent comparison, flouts the methods of scientific inquiry—an approach to learning of which *American Birds* has long implied in manifold ways that it is a proponent.

To publish with such ostentation (i.e., two articles, not just one, and both covers of the journal) the writers' illusory construct as science-in-progress is an affront to all who pursue elementary scientific inquiry. There is simply no verifiable information, no wealth of experience, not even common knowledge on which to base the writers' identification—the conclusion on which the importance of all else in these papers is based. And surely no one who has ever studied carefully collected and prepared scientific specimens of birds could suggest seriously that some other kind of information could supplant the verifiable original information we would all have gained from having, in perpetuity, the specimen to study. No matter what its identity might have proved to be!

Please note that it was only *contemporary* elementary scientific inquiry, *by others*, that provided these writers the slender hook on which they hung their frail conclusion. What would they have done instead, I wonder, if someone had not recently *named* something *Calidris paramelanotos*? Would they have collected this bird if they had decided it was *completely* new to science? Not merely new to the entire planet Earth beyond the continent of Australia, but *completely* new! And would *American Birds* have leaped to publish if six writers had said their subject was new to science but they had no specimen to support their contention? I suggest that a leap of faith of essentially this magnitude is just what *American Birds* has made in publishing these papers.

In precipitously and lavishly stamp-

ing this "record" with its imprimatur, *American Birds* has put in jeopardy the reputation I thought it had long been working to achieve—that it is a serious journal to be paid attention by all bird students, from beginning bird-watcher to bookish ornithologist.

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I would like to comment on the book review on the 'Birds of the Middle East and North Africa' (HPCW) in *AB* Winter 88. I think that the K. Parkes comments on a lot of points that may be of some interest, but are certainly not the most important ones. These, in my opinion, when one is discussing a field guide are: The plates should be correct as to colors and shape (jizz). (Of course as many as possible of the different plumages should also be depicted.) The text should be informative and correct. The maps should be accurate (recent knowledge included). I find that Parker has not even mentioned one of the above points, far less commented on how good the book is in this respect. His comments are on how the book looks, more as if it was a coffee-table book.

He is of the opinion that the text is too small. I, on the other hand think that for once the text is small enough and it has been possible to include enough text so that there is really some information in it. He also says that headings would have been good. I'm constantly irritated by all the headings in field guides which take up so much space that there is hardly any room for the text.

He assumes that the users of this guide will not be familiar with the species that are omitted (i.e. those that are included in Peterson). I believe that most of the users will be Americans who have visited the Western Palearctic before or Europeans who already have an intimate knowledge of European birds and do not wish to carry around information on those. Also if all these species would have been included, either the book would no longer have been a field guide or the space allotted to each species would have been no greater than in

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Heinzel, Fitter and Parslow (HFP). I can't see the point of writing two books with the same contents. If the book had been on the Middle East alone, only 21 species could have been omitted (according to the review), that would hardly have left much room over for proper discussion on identification. The strength of HPCW is that it gives more information on several species that are mentioned very briefly in other guides. Most of this

information is not printed in any other field guide. Personally, I want a book which will enable me to identify difficult and little known species, and I will denote enough time both before the trip and during it, to study this guide so that I learn most of what I need to know beforehand, and will know which page and which spot to look up if I should have forgotten the exact details. Of course if one has a tour leader who identifies the birds, it is not necessary to have a field guide which helps one doing this. Then one with some nice pictures could be quite enough, I suppose.

It's true that the maps do not include wintering areas, and that may be a drawback, but as for the summer range, the maps are more accurate than any I've seen so far.

The color plates by Willis are certainly not the best part of the book. They are too pale overall, and not as accurate as one would hope. The ink drawings are much better. The text is of much higher standard, even though information is missing or false on some difficult species. I.e. even though the book has some faults, it is a good book, which is sorely needed, as HFP includes little information on southern species.

To conclude. To choose HFP as the better guide in the Middle East is a big mistake, personally I would bring them both along with a host of others. But the one I'd carry in the field would certainly be HPCW.

P. S. I just wanted to say that it would be nice to see more informative book reviews in the future (informative as to the 'real' contents of a book). It is rather easy to see for oneself what it looks like, but it's difficult to know about the correctness of the contents if one is not familiar with the species. I do think it is a pity if subscribers to *American Birds* do not buy the book because of the review. If, what Mr. Parkes meant was that the book is not the best choice for Americans unfamiliar with the avifauna of the Western Palearctic and with just a small interest in identification, he should have said so and not implied that the book is of no use to anyone.

The idea that every reliable observer should record bird sightings and send them somewhere for analysis is fine in principal, but I submit that in today's "real world" it would accomplish nothing in practice. I refer, of course, to Dennis Paulson's letter to this column in *American Birds*, Summer 1989 (Volume 43, No. 2). The problem is data management. Let's play with some numbers.

Assume there are 20,000 hard-core birders in North America that maintain records, even though some might now keep them only for personal edification. Let's say these birders could all be convinced to send reports to a clearing house. These birders are also assumed to take 150 field trips a year and see 100 species each outing. Assume also that there are 200,000 soft-core birders that keep casual records and that 10% of these could be persuaded to contribute data. These birders are assumed to take 50 field trips a year and see 50 species per outing. Finally, assume that a data record consists of observer, date, species, location, and number of individuals. Assume also that every tenth record requires a comment and that reports are submitted monthly.

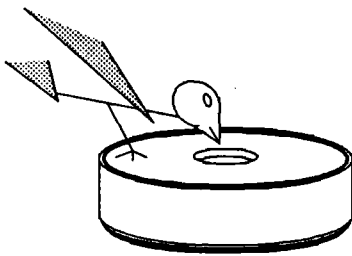
I figure each sighting record, in a highly compacted form, would require a minimum of 35 bytes; the comments would require another 50 bytes, as would the name and address of the observer. This works out to over 10 gigabytes of data per year—for the United States only! Who's equipped to handle this avalanche of information? Before we encourage reporting on a massive scale, let's be sure we have the data-processing and data-management infrastructure necessary to deal with what's mailed in (or, more appropriately, transmitted *via* E-mail).

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American Birds appreciates and encourages the comments of its readers. Please send your letter, along with your name and address to: *American Birds*, Letters to the Editor, 950 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022. Letters may be edited for clarity and space.

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