

Editors' Notebook

Regional realignments

With the rise in the popularity in birding in recent years and the acceleration of communication through the Internet, reports—as well as documented records—of notable birds have increased at a pace perhaps never before seen on this continent. This pace has occasioned some growing pains for a journal that has lived through most of its 85 years at a very different and gentler pace, and the structure of future issues of this journal will represent an attempt to adapt to the new high-speed world of birding.

In the past, to be sure, regional editors received reams of material, at least in heavily birded or heavily populated regions. We recall tales of editors sitting down to distill the contents of letters and dossiers stacked two feet high for the fall season; the composition of the regional report could take weeks, with drafts passed back and forth by mail, carefully typed, edited, and retyped, and then typeset through the Audubon offices. The amount of work in producing a journal back then seems Herculean to an editor accustomed to receiving and sending all material in electronic form—no paper, no postage, no red pen. We have it easy today, by comparison.

But at least, in the past, the photocopied field notes and summaries that reached regional editors usually carried some semblance of details about the less-usual birds reported; regional editors developed a long-term epistolary, if not a direct personal, relationship with contributors over the years; and contributors often felt compelled, without being asked, to supply a photograph or two to support their documentation. Rumors of “interesting” birds rarely made it into print.

Regional editors in the current era face a different set of practices. The Internet is alive with tantalizing bird sightings, many of them doubtlessly correct, many of them clearly wishful thinking, few of them documented with photographs or by any other means that would meet even minimal standards for inclusion in regional reports. To chase down each report in a large or heavily-birded region is the equivalent of taking the plunge into Lewis Carroll's looking glass—what seemed substantive recedes or vanishes, while the fantastic looms large. The technology that would seem at first to ease an editor's work can in fact multiply his or her tasks beyond accomplishing, or at least frustrate even the most patient among us. There can be no doubt that thousands of tales speak against this scenario, marvelous triumphs in which a clever birder finds a bird of interest, photographs it, posts the finding and the photograph, and provides nearly instantaneous documentation and bird-finding information to the public. It is refreshing that such tales are increasingly common. And refreshing, too, that birds of uncertain identity are photographed and become the stuff of international conversations that extend for weeks in the public domain (and, no, not just about gulls!).

In addition to the billions of bird bits and bytes on the Internet, the flowering of states' and provinces' records committees means still more correspondence that requires a regional editor's attention; in regions that contain parts of (as many as) eleven states, such correspondence is ever more taxing and time-consuming. With most states east of 86° W now being partitioned between two reporting regions, we have reached the breaking point for some editors in terms of their ability to compose a balanced report in a timely, nuanced, and thoughtful fashion. This is not a matter of talent but one of time and administrative difficulty: the larg-

er, more heavily populated or birded the region, the more complex it will be, and the greater the burden will be of belated material and correspondence from subregional editors and contributors. And so we have been faced in recent years with the question of how to continue to ease regional editors' increasing burdens while keeping the journal a manageable and engaging one.

In their attempts to remedy the problems associated with proliferating bird reports, already apparent in the past decade, previous journal editors have used a number of strategies, such as dividing bird records by bird family among a team of editors, or dividing the records by season, that is, among “seasonal” regional editors who write one report per year. Both strategies tend to make the work of editing the journal a more centripetal experience—with less active involvement with the journal on a regular basis, regional editors inevitably find that their ties to *North American Birds* loosen, and the consistency of the enterprise is lessened. The work of the journal's editor shifts from coordination of reports and articles from several dozen people to the management of a large contingent of people, with late-arriving or incomplete regional reports an increasing worry. Both strategies, certainly, have been preferable to the outright loss of regional reports and have kept the journal afloat through difficult times.

But another strategy for reducing our growing pains—the subdivision of regions—has been quite successful over many decades and shows no disadvantages. Arizona and New Mexico have been separated into two regions, as have the likewise enormous states of Colorado and Wyoming, Utah and Nevada, formerly all merged into the Mountain West region. In the more distant past, in which huge areas of northeastern Canada were part of a region that extended down to New York, the results of subdivision have likely been inarguably positive, for editors and for readers alike. Early in the journal's history, reporting regions' boundaries were based on a set of factors that included birders' regional “stomping grounds,” various conceptions of biogeographic provinces, editors' interests, and political boundaries. All of these are reasonable factors to consider when devising reporting regions. The reality of the current era, however, is that bird records committees and publications (as well as Internet groups and listserves) are rarely based on any but the last of these—the boundaries of nations, states, and provinces. As much as we might feel affection for the very rough biogeographic regions called “Appalachia” or “Middlewestern Prairie,” these designations do not correspond neatly to the way in which bird records are reported, reviewed, and published. Moreover, sadly, there is not very much actual native prairie in most of the states that have fallen under the rubric of the “Middlewestern Prairie.” Few regions, if any, have followed unambiguous biogeographic lines.

And so the decision of the editorial team here, in concert with the regional editors, has been to move in the direction of smaller, more easily managed regions that are defined predominantly by the boundaries of U. S. states, rather than biogeographic breaks. All of the changes that will appear in the next issue, Volume 57, Number 1 (the Fall Migration 2002) pertain to the eastern and middlewestern regions south of Canada. The introductory sections of the regional reports that follow spell out these changes in detail, but, in brief, the East will now have the following reporting regions:

- **Hudson-Delaware** (New York, New Jersey, Delaware only): Editors Robert Paxton, Joseph Burgiel, Steve Kelling, Richard Veit, and David Cutler;
- **Eastern Highlands & Upper Ohio River Valley** (Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia): Editor Bob Leberman;
- **Middle Atlantic** (all of Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia): Editor Marshall J. Iliff;
- **Southern Atlantic** (all of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia): Editor Ricky Davis;
- **Illinois & Indiana**: Editor Ken Brock;
- **Iowa & Missouri**: Editors Robert I. Cecil (winter), James J. Dinsmore (summer), William Eddleman (fall), and Roger McNeill (spring);
- **Tennessee & Kentucky**: Editors Chris Sloan and Brainard Palmer-Ball;
- **New England** (no changes): Editorial team unchanged; and
- **Central Southern** (Florida west of the Apalachicola River, all of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas): Editorial team unchanged.

Consult the various regional reports for email addresses for new regional editors.

Previously, 16 U. S. states were broken up among regions; we now have only Florida, California, and Montana subdivided, at the urging of editors and contributors from those parts of the world. In pairing off smaller states, we attempted to combine them in ways that had at least some biogeographic sense—Kentucky and Tennessee, for example, have remarkable similarities in both their eastern thirds and western two-thirds—and to pair states that are birded by people from neighboring states: Illinois and Indiana fit nicely, as do Iowa and Missouri in that respect. The ornithological ties between West Virginia and Pennsylvania are not well known to those who live outside those states, but they make a pairing logical, as do their similar avifaunas over broad areas. Eastern Ohio fits well with those states ornithologically, and although western Ohio clearly has stronger affinities with the Midwest, we chose not to fragment the state among multiple reporting regions. In fact, we considered dozens of ways to reorganize the regions, and our arrangement, though imperfect, should work well toward the goals of making the regional editors' work more manageable and refined and making the production of the journal a smoother and more reliable process.

—Edward S. Brinkley
 —Stephen J. Dinsmore
 —Alvaro Jaramillo
 —Paul E. Lehman

Our contributions & our thanks

How gratifying it was to open the recent issue of *The Auk* (Vol. 119) and peruse the "Literature Cited" section of the "Forty-third Supplement to *The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds*!" Eleven different publications of the A. B. A. are cited, and most of these are articles from this journal. We often think of old *North American Birds* as an informal publication, digesting the discoveries of "birders" across the continent. But our articles also advance proper ornithological questions, most of which arise from "curious" field experiences of careful birders—as in this issue, Cin-Ty Lee and Andrew Birch's encounters with several subspecies of American Pipit in California, or Paul Buckley and

Shai Mitra's informal but rigorous study of their local wintering brant on Long Island, New York.

In both cases, the authors' discerning observations of their respective flocks revealed several nonconformists, and in both cases, their observations led the teams of authors to delve deeply into the literature on American Pipit and Brant, as well as into the museum collections, with the result that both discovered and filled gaps in our knowledge of these difficult subspecies groups. Both papers summarize our current understanding of taxonomic (and to a lesser extent field identification) problems with these groups, but both advance our knowledge by their inclusion of field experiences and their analysis of these experiences in the greater context of recent Eurasian ornithological research. For both papers, a broad correspondence with colleagues around the entire northern hemisphere was required, as well as travel to various museums. The results, we think you will find, make for fascinating reading and will hopefully bring us all to study our pipits and brant more carefully. And we hope, too, that papers such as these will stimulate readers to submit manuscripts on their own "curious" field experiences.

Articles such as these are the product of much behind-the-scenes teamwork. We are much indebted to a crew of hardworking reviewers who helped improve all of the manuscripts that eventually become articles for Volume 56: Per Alström, Steve N. G. Howell, Guy McCaskie, Douglas B. McNair, J. Van Remsen, Jr., Paul E. Lehman, Kimball L. Garrett, P. A. Buckley, Stephen J. Dinsmore, and Richard Millington. For financial underwriting of *North American Birds*, another species of teamwork, we thank our friends at **Chevron Texaco Energy Research and Technology Company**, in particular Pat O'Brien of the Environmental Unit, who have stood by us through the tempests of publication and seen us to the firm financial ground on which the journal now rests. We hope that this and future sponsors of the journal will soon bring the journal into even more productive pastures. A fundraising effort to advance the quality and augment the contents of the journal, currently known as "The Friends of *North American Birds*," will soon be announced; we are delighted by this initiative, as well as by the tireless activity of A. B. A.'s Director of Publications, Allan Burns, on the journal's behalf.

We are in the happy situation, too, of being able to announce a few of the fine articles forthcoming in the next volume. These will be Hybridization between an Elegant Tern and a Sandwich Tern in West-Central Florida by Richard T. Paul, Bill Pranty, Ann F. Paul, and Ann B. Hodgson; Notes on vagrancy in Brown-headed Nuthatch, with attention to recent range expansion and long-term habitat changes, by Frank Renfrow; Hybridization between Glossy and White-faced Ibises, by James W. Arterburn and Joseph A. Grzybowski; Vagrancy of Gray Kingbird in North America, by George L. Armistead and Marshall J. Iliff; and Occurrence of "Dark-bellied Brant" in North America, by P. A. Buckley, S. S. Mitra, and E. S. Brinkley. Down the road, we're hoping to have ready for publication Anthony W. White's "Status of certain seabirds in the Bahama Islands and adjacent waters" and Angus Wilson's "Black-tailed Godwits in the Americas: Patterns of occurrence and the vexing question of subspecies." All of these articles provide fine summaries of their subjects' changing distribution and vagrancy (and in two cases, the resultant hybridization), and all represent some of the very best work of field observation and analysis on and off the continent. We look forward to Volume 57 immensely.

—Edward S. Brinkley
 —Matthew F. Sharp

