

BIRD LISTING AND THE FIELD OBSERVER*

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I have been impressed for some time by the restrictive nature of bird check-lists, used by field observers to tally their "scores" of species seen in an area. While such lists are an invaluable aid to beginning birders, to experienced observers in an unfamiliar area, and to veteran observers in summarizing their observations, too often they constitute the sum of the observer's records. Lists of birds invariably follow some authority, and being simple lists they mask many interesting problems and discourage the useful accumulation of meaningful biological data. Of course not every observer is personally interested in putting forth effort for the advancement of ornithology, but unconsciously he is making the observations that qualify him to do so. With very little extra effort an observer can increase the value of his observations greatly. Perhaps what is needed to facilitate this is a new form of field check-list.

Such a check-list (I have never seen one) certainly would not be a simple species list. Rather, each species would have space for notation of all readily identifiable forms, such as juveniles, females, males, eclipse plumage males. Recognizable hybrids would be included, as would subspecies that are identifiable in the field. Yet such a list would probably create as many problems as it solved, primarily because it too would encourage precise determinations even in cases where this is not possible. In fact, there is no substitute for field notes relating to one's observations. Only in this way can the features of a putative hybrid or very rare bird from elsewhere be placed on record, and made available for future consideration.

Challenges for the field observer are many, and as he gains experience in observing birds in various places at diverse times of the year, he is able to contribute ever more to ornithology. Even a beginner acquainted with the Mallard Duck, instead of recording say "60 mallards," can maximize his observations by recording, for example, "32 males, 28 females, mainly in pairs," or noting if young are present, or males are in eclipse plumage, etc. Simplicity in recording observations is a grave fault, minimizing the observer's potential contribution.

All odd birds, in fact anything out of the ordinary, should be described fully by the observer in a field notebook. The careful observer

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will give at least a glance at any singing bird — hybrid birds may sing songs like those of their parental species, and there are records of birds singing songs like those of other species. Peculiarities of plumage may be an indication of mutation (mutants ought to be noted, and albinistic or partly albinistic birds should be described, etc.), or a hybrid may be involved. In all cases a full description is preferable to any short-cut tabulation. For example, a “Brewster’s Warbler” listing for a Blue-winged x Golden-winged Warbler hybrid has relatively little information content (see Short, Proc. XIII Int. Ornith. Congress, pp. 147-160, 1963, for a discussion of the great variation in these hybrids). A “hybrid flicker” is not a good or even a valid notation, for California *breeding* flickers exhibit many indications (sometimes so strong that the birds resemble true hybrids from the hybrid zone) of introgression, that is of gene flow from the distant hybrid zone, and from the eastern flicker populations (Short, Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist., vol. 129, pp. 307-428, 1965). Calling an introgressant bird a “hybrid” implies that it is a vagrant from the zone of hybridization, whereas the individual actually may belong to the California breeding population. It is difficult to determine flicker hybrids in the West because of strong introgression, although generally the hybrids show intermediacy in several characters (e.g., “moustache” color, nape patch, shaft color), whereas introgressants usually show intermediacy in one character, or bare traces of introgression in several characters. Hence the need for accurate, detailed descriptions of putative hybrids (hybrids do indeed occur in numbers in the West during migration and in winter). I should note that my treatment of the various North American flickers as conspecific is a taxonomic matter, irrelevant to the field observer’s task of identifying the identifiable.

Rather than becoming belligerent at criticism of his observations, the observer should encourage and welcome criticism. Not only does the observer gain experience from such criticism, but the ultimate value of the observer’s records are dependent upon his proven ability, and this ability must be demonstrated to field experts. These experts, usually regional specialists engaged in compiling and maintaining records, must be skeptical, for only by being critical can they insure the validity of the reports emanating from their region. Such care is typical at all levels for the recognition of records; the American Ornithologists’ Union Committee on Classification and Nomenclature is equally critical of records as are (or should be) regional compilers.

Let me conclude by stating that I am not “against” bird listing as such. Some of my good friends, indeed even some professional ornithologists, are spare-time listers. And many of us mentally note new

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birds whether seen at foreign airports, museum gardens abroad, or wherever we happen to be (it is sensible for an ornithologist to see as many kinds of birds as he can, and many ornithologists started their life's work with that as an initial aim!). However, my point is that we should encourage at all times accurate, detailed observations recorded on paper (or on tapes). These should take the place of the unrecorded mental notes usually accompanying simple listing.

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NOTES

A RED-FACED WARBLER REACHES CALIFORNIA

On 30 May 1970 Xenia and Pierre Devillers and I found a Red-faced Warbler *Cardellina rubrifrons* at the Brock Ranch situated about 20 miles east of Holtville, Imperial County, California. This bird was alone in a cottonwood, and responded to "squeaking", descending from the upper portions of the tree. It moved around rather slowly on the outermost portions of the limbs, remaining motionless, with wings partially extended and bill open, for short periods of time, for the temperature was close to 100°. The following description was obtained:

The forehead, throat, and upper breast were a dirty pink, palest on the breast. The top of the head was black, with the black extending down the sides of the face behind the eye to include the ear coverts. A small dirty white area on the nape separated the black of the black top of the head from the gray back. The back, wings and tail were gray; the wing coverts were edged with dirty white, producing two rather indistinct wing-bars on each wing. The rump was dirty white. The belly and crissum were dirty white, and the flanks were a very pale gray. The bill was black, and looked rather stubby and thick.