

Authorities Make too Many Mistakes

HAROLD H. AXTELL, Buffalo Museum of Science, Buffalo, N.Y.

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The most competent field ornithologists can misidentify birds on occasion. In other words, man is not perfect and hence may make mistakes. To reduce these errors to a minimum, statisticians and other compilers of sight records, must demand of everyone a written report of the circumstances concerned with an unusual observation. This is necessary so that future authors can evaluate the sight record on the evidence obtained at the time of observation . . .

A frequent source of error is in misjudging size. Several times I have seen perched Starlings mistaken for Crows. Persons who have spent a great deal of time at Hawk Mountain have momentarily mistaken airplanes, butterflies and even gnats for hawks. Usually experienced observers quickly discover their error but on three or four occasions I have known a distant airplane to remain misidentified long enough for more than one person to express a serious opinion on what kind of hawk it was.

One competent authority I know misidentified a Crow because he was unaware of a size illusion even after some twenty or thirty seconds of discussion and looking at the bird. Finally one of his companions had to tell him that the bird perched in the top of an apple tree 150 yards away, which he persisted in calling a Crow, was in reality a Redpoll!

Another frequent source of error is color illusion. Two widely recognized authorities whose records are almost never doubted agreed that two birds were definitely swans, and wrote them down as such on their field record sheet. It then occurred to them to try to determine which kind of swan. They approached closer, and to their astonishment found their "swans" to be Black Ducks. Light conditions can perform apparent miracles in creating il-

lusions of many kinds, especially of color. Many birders have known a "big white bird" to turn out to be a normally colored Crow.

It is generally stated (and to some extent true) that the validity of a record is greatly increased when several observers concur in its identification. The reader will note, however, that all of the following misidentifications cited here involve several or many observers, including in each instance a number of authorities of some repute. In each instance also, there was no likelihood that the observers were not all referring to the same bird.

Fox Sparrows had been reported in early September, some weeks earlier than normal, by the local bird authority in a small community. The following day six bird birders from elsewhere, three of whom are commonly accorded the status of authorities in their home country, went to verify the report. The three leaders were pointing out several birds 15 to 40 feet away as Fox Sparrows to their three friends, who were concurring, when 2 more bird watchers came along who succeeded in convincing them that the birds were all Song Sparrows. Apparently no Fox Sparrows were present . . .

In spite of such occurrences, good observers are not likely to discover how often they may be wrong unless they break up into separate groups, see and identify some of the same birds, then get together and compare notes. This procedure is often so startlingly revealing that it might well be tried by clubs as a scientific exercise to prove the need for greater caution, skepticism, and verification. I will restrict my illustration to a single example. Three automobile-loads of us were on a field trip that was notable for the number of experts in each car. A large hawk flew low and slowly over the road while the occupants of all three cars stopped and examined it. A few minutes later we met and discovered that the occupants of one car had unanimously agreed that the hawk was a Red-tail, those of another car agreed it was a Rough-leg,

and the third a Marsh Hawk . . .

The immediate purpose of this paper is to promote a more widespread recognition of the knowledge that apparently all field students of birds make frequent errors in sight identification of which they often remain unaware. In so far as this immediate purpose is achieved, two further steps should logically follow: first, a popular recognition of the unreliability of sight records as usually compiled, and second, a desire for greater reliability, with an increased interest in adopting scientific methods of verification.

Birders would then recognize that for an important sight record, there is a lack of adequate authority in any observer's mere reputation or in his avowed feeling of absolute certainty. These fallen authorities . . . must then be replaced by the superior authority of permanently available evidence, even if it is only written evidence of the mental processes by which a person determined the identity of a bird. Lacking material evidence such as a specimen, photograph, or sound recording, the person interested in making a valid sight record of a rarity will supply evidence by making a com-

plete written record preferably on the spot, that shows all the observations, reasoning, and other factors on which he based his identification. This account should be filed permanently in some known place where it will always be available to any qualified student for reference . . . It can be examined in detail and used as the basis for a reasoned judgment as to the probable correctness of the identification.

It should be added that although an observer's birding experience, knowledge, ability, and honesty are not, by themselves alone, sufficient to make his unusual sight records acceptable to a properly informed compiler, these achievements are none-the-less of basic importance. Every competent censor-compiler learns to look for signs of these characteristics in every verifying account by "reading between the lines," if necessary . . . Adoption of these verifying procedures will not give us sight records in which the correctly identified are always distinguishable, with 100% certainty, from the misidentified. But the improvement in the ability of compilers to judge the probable validity of the records will be enormous.

Christmas Gift Suggestions

GIVE A BIRD BOOK — A bird book makes an ideal Christmas present, particularly for young people. There are many bird books on the market these days; many are good and some are not so good. However, it should be pointed out that the first essential is a field guide for identifying birds. It is almost universally agreed that by far the best book for this purpose is still R. T. Peterson's **Field Guide to the Birds**. Again we must caution you NOT to buy the **Field Guide to the Western Birds** as this covers the Rocky Mountains and beyond. Available at the Canada Drug and Book Store in Regina, at \$4.00, plus 10 cents allowance for postage.

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