
Taking Good Field Notes

Minimum Considerations

for Verification of Sight Records of Birds

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There has been much progress in bird identification since Audubon had to verify his observations over the barrel of a muzzle-loader. In the absence of a collected specimen, one's observations can be subjected to alternative means of verification. Often, when unusual birds are observed, or common birds are observed under unusual circumstances, the observer will want to report what has been seen to someone. The observer also may expect their observation to be published in a local or regional report, or added to check-lists of birds for the region in which the observation occurred. In so doing, one may be challenged to demonstrate the accuracy and veracity of the observation and evidence may be solicited to verify the account. In contexts where verification of observations is desirable, good quality photographs of the observed species supplement, but do not substitute for a detailed, written account of the observation. Descriptions of the rarity from such written accounts should be sufficient to permit identification of the species, using only the written description, by an independent, experienced observer.

Here in the Cayuga Lake Basin, any species reported that either is not listed in Birds of the Cayuga Lake Basin New York Annotated Check-list (McIlroy and Smith 1992), or is listed as "Accidental" (Acl) on that list, should be accompanied by details of the observation. Consideration of at least the following points, at the time of the observation, will enhance the chances that an observation will be verifiable and acceptable as a record of occurrence to more experienced observers. These suggestions are based, in part, on those offered by Axtell (1955d), and form a basis for review of observations of rarities in modern times by state avian records committees, like the New York State Avian Records Committee (DeBenedictis 1978).

1. Date and time of day of the observation.
2. Number of individuals of the species in question which were seen.
3. Detailed account of the location of the observation; include its distance from a nearby highway intersection or prominent landmark; a map, or specific reference to a U.S. Geological Survey topographic quadrangle, would be helpful.
4. Names of other observers accompanying you who saw the bird, and identified it.
5. Names of other observers, if any, who independently identified the bird in agreement with your identification; explain the circumstances.
6. Your previous acquaintance with this species; how many times have you seen it over how many years?
7. Type, brand, magnification, objective lens diameter, and condition of optical equipment used.

8. Distance at which you saw the bird and how the distance was judged, i.e. was it estimated, paced, or measured with a tape.

9. Lighting conditions: (a) Was it generally sunny or were there light, medium, or dark clouds? (b) Was the bird in the open or in light, medium, or deep shade? (c) Where was the sun as you faced the bird and in relation to the bird (behind you, in front of you, to your left or right side)?

10. What was the bird doing and what was its position in relation to the observer (e.g. high in a tree, on the ground, in low bushes)?

11. What was the habitat like; in what kinds of vegetation was the bird seen?

12. Length of time the bird was studied under the above conditions and was it determined from a watch or estimated.

13. What field marks were observed and other details noted which contributed to your certainty of your identification?

14. What diagnostic habits, songs, calls, or associated species were noted?

15. What other similar or confusing species were considered and eliminated by the evidence you collected during the observation of this species?

16. References consulted: (a) Did you use a field guide or similar aid during the observation? (b) Have you referred to any aid such as a book, illustration, or knowledgeable ornithologist since the observation? (c) If you answer, "Yes" to either (a) or (b), how, specifically, did the aid(s) consulted influence your conclusions and what aid was used?

17. Were written field notes, including most of the above information, taken in the field at the time of the observation? If notes were not taken in the field, how long after the observation were they transcribed and what references were consulted in the interim.

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