

Documenting Rare Birds: What the Records Committee Needs

by the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

By far the most concrete way to document a rarity traditionally has been a specimen. Many of the rare species on the Official Pennsylvania List are there because the P. O. R. C. was able to discover the presence and whereabouts of historical specimens. Most modern-day specimens are of birds already found dead or moribund. However, picking up dead birds is illegal under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act without an official collecting permit or salvage permit. The only exceptions are game birds otherwise regulated and a few introduced species. Therefore, this method is not particularly useful for most observers.

The best of the more widely used methods of documenting rarities is by photographs. A picture can indeed be worth a thousand words and can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection of a record. Photographs of rarities do not have to be the glorious portraits that grace the cover of *Birding* magazine. Even a Polaroid snapshot would do if it clearly depicted the bird in question, but quite obviously the better the quality of the photograph the easier the committee's job. All photographs should be clearly labeled with the observer's name, the locality, county, and the date the photograph was taken. All these details are actually more important than the name of the species photographed, as it is the committee's job to determine this during the evaluation.

Occasionally even good quality photographs may be insufficient to confirm the identity of a species. For example, Eastern and Western meadowlarks can best be safely separated in the field by voice; the most valuable form of documentation for these species would be a tape recording made of their songs. Several Pennsylvania records of Chuck-will's-widow have been documented adequately by tape recordings and accepted by the committee on the strength of these alone. Also, videotapes can be extremely useful in documenting the occurrence of rarities. Pennsylvania's first and only Ross's

Gull was filmed using a home movie camera and the video submitted to P. O. R. C. The observer's commentary on such tapes and videos (date, location, county, and any other relevant details) is particularly helpful.

An accepted record based on a specimen, photograph, or tape recording is categorized as a Class I record. However, many rarities are found by observers who are either not photographers or who don't have access to a camera, tape recorder, or camcorder at the time. Some birds are simply too distant for photography or never call. In such cases the written word is extremely valuable as a form of documentation (Class II for independent details from more than one observer, Class III for a single observer). Unfortunately many birders seem to underestimate the value of written descriptions of rarities. In many instances the committee has received only a photograph of a bird as supporting evidence for its occurrence. On more than one occasion, the quality of the photograph has been insufficient to identify the bird conclusively. The most thoroughly documented and acceptable of records are those where the observer has taken full advantage of as many forms of documentation as possible. Invariably in these cases the foundation of the document has been a high quality written description. Carry a notebook into the field with you and, when describing the bird you are watching, take notes and complete the description without consulting a field guide. Even well-observed rarities should be documented independently by as many observers as possible. One person's notes may possibly include an important descriptive feature that another observer's does not.

The written documentation received by P. O. R. C. over the years has varied greatly in quality. While many observers make an excellent attempt at describing what they see in writing, others supply brief, sketchy or inaccurate notes. On several occasions a person has supplied information on a bird based on a conversation with the observer. In these cases the author of the submission was not present when

the bird was seen. Regrettably the committee cannot accept submissions such as these. Only first-hand accounts can be accepted as documentation. For classification purposes, two independent descriptions are needed for an accepted record to be categorized as Class II. Often two observers will collaborate and co-author one description, but this ends up in the Class III category, if accepted, simply because only one submission was received.

As with all other forms of documentation, written descriptions should begin with the species described, the exact locality and county, the date (this is missed surprisingly often), and the observer's name and address. The circumstances surrounding the sighting should be given, especially the weather conditions at the time and the bird's distance from the observer. However, what matters most of all in written documentation is a plumage description of the bird itself. All too often precious little is said about this. In several extreme cases submissions have been received by the committee in which nothing is actually said about the bird's plumage in several pages of narrative. The committee has no option but to reject a record in these circumstances. In appropriate cases, tell also how the identification was separated from similar species.

Plumage descriptions should be as detailed and accurate as possible, and a thorough knowledge of what is often called a bird's "topography" is important. The topography consists basically of the visible parts of a bird. The most confusing written descriptions received by the committee are those in which it is unclear just exactly what part of a bird the observer is referring to. For instance, one common mistake is the use of the term "eye stripe". A Chipping Sparrow for example, is often said to have a white "eye stripe" in alternate plumage. In fact this species has a black eye stripe, which is the stripe running through the eye, and a white supercilium, which is the correct term for the stripe which passes from the bill base above

the eye. It is important to learn the various topographical terms so that their accurate use removes any ambiguity in the description. Consult any of the current field guides for an illustration explaining the topography of a bird. The introduction in the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America has one of the best such illustrations available. It might be helpful to copy the illustrations and paste them to the inside cover of a field notebook.

Please send documentation for all review species on the accompanying list to: **Nick Pulcinella, Secretary, P.O.R.C., 210 Welcome Ave., Norwood, PA 19074. E-mail: nickpul@bellatlantic.net**

CHECKLIST OF ELEMENTS TO INCLUDE IN AN IDEAL WRITTEN DOCUMENTATION

1. Species name
2. Location
3. Date and time of observation
4. How long you watched the bird
5. Your address and phone number
6. Names of other observers, if any
7. Distance from the bird
8. Weather conditions
9. Optics used
10. Bird's behavior
11. Complete description of the bird—what you saw, not copied later from a field guide (all of these might not be visible in every case):
12. --- top, including crown, nape, back, upper tail coverts and upper tail
13. --- side, including face, side of breast, and flanks
14. --- underside, including chin, neck, breast, belly, undertail coverts, and underside of tail
15. --- wings, including as many portions of upperside and underside plumage as possible
16. --- non-plumage features, including bill, legs, feet, and color of eye (as for a gull)
17. How you distinguished the bird from similar species
18. Previous experience with the species, if any
19. Any discussion that might support the identification

Large *Catharus* Thrush Migration in Hamburg, Berks Co., Pa.

by Kerry Grim

I have a nighttime habit of going out on the deck and listening for the 'peeps' of migrating birds. This spring, the weather was generally warm with clear skies during the first three weeks of May. In approximately 20 tries, I had heard only one peep from a single songbird. Obviously the migration under these conditions was high overhead and well out of my hearing range. Birds passing over our house would have to be well over 800 feet overhead to have enough altitude to cross over the Kittatinny Ridge a mile to the north of our house.

At 10 p.m. Sunday, May 21, I stepped outside and could hardly believe what I was hearing. The sky sounded like a chorus of spring peepers. The calls were those of Swainson's Thrushes—hundreds of them! In less than half a minute, I heard more Swainson's Thrushes than I had seen or heard previously in my 26 years of birding!

The next morning I was up at 3:30 a.m. and verified with recordings that some of the calls I had heard were Gray-cheeked Thrushes. Once again I went outside and heard a fair number of Swainson's Thrushes, along with several Gray-cheeked Thrushes. By 4:15 the robins were in full song and the *Catharus* thrush calls had ceased.

The weather Monday night was similar to that of Sunday night--cloudy, no wind, low cloud ceiling, but more humid than the previous night. Everything was wet from an evening shower. This time, with counter in hand, I tried counting the thrush calls. In 20 minutes I tallied 430 Swainson's Thrush and six Gray-cheeked Thrush calls. As high as the

number seemed, the rate of calls was approximately a third the number of calls heard the previous night! The calls were much less distinct than the previous night, probably due to the wet trees and vegetation.

Tuesday night, I went outside at 9 p.m. There was fog with a moderate drizzle. A few Swainson's Thrushes called, but nothing like the previous nights.

A lot of questions came to mind while thinking back on this. Did all the thrushes in the group call? Or, was it just a few that called in a large group? Where do they go during the day? No one had reported large numbers of them to our south. This migration of thrushes was likely normal, except that weather conditions brought them down to a lower altitude, within hearing range. I try to visualize what an awesome sight this would have been during the daylight hours.

Catharus thrush call references on the internet:

NOCTURNAL CALLS OF GRAY-CHEEKED & BICKNELL'S THRUSH:

<http://www.birdsource.org/features/thrushes/>

NOCTURNAL CALLS OF SWAINSON'S THRUSH:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/kalahari/migrating.html>

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