

Truth or Fiction—Rare Bird Reports

By Marcel Such

Scientists and amateurs alike spend a lot of time and energy tracking migration patterns and breeding locations of bird species in an effort to understand population fluctuation and avian ecology, among other things. Databases are consulted to determine the likelihood of an occurrence of a species in a certain location. If a report doesn't mesh with what was previously known, layers of proof are required before the ornithological community will accept it as valid. This is appropriate for scientific purposes, but I often wonder about all the unconfirmed sightings.

In some recent correspondence with my uncle's girlfriend, I asked if she kept track of the birds she has seen in her yard in Gig Harbor, Washington. She sent me this list: Oregon Junco, Hummingbird, Towhee, Chickadee, Steller's Jay, Bald Eagle, Mourning Dove, Owl, Hawk, and Stonechat. STONECHAT??? Did she get any photos? Did she just see it once? Her reply was "No, I didn't get any photos. I wish I had. I saw it just one time." I'm sure that no one would believe her, but that doesn't mean it *wasn't* a real Stonechat. We'll never know for sure.

However, there are some cases where the rare bird is confirmed. For example, consider the Streak-backed Oriole that visited Loveland, Colorado last winter. If the oriole had landed in any backyard other than the Koglers', it probably would never have been noticed, let alone be correctly identified! It is almost always necessary for an unusual bird to come under the gaze of a birder in order to be seen, identified, and publicized.

Just a couple weeks ago, our mom was informed by a neighbor that she had several pairs of Hepatic Tanagers visiting her feeders. That would be a first county record, and is a very uncommon breeder in the state! One or two would be possible, but a dozen? Unbelievable. She described the male and female plumages perfectly and explained why it wasn't the much more common Western Tanager. Then a week or so later we received a call from her telling us that they were actually Red Crossbills, a much more common species that we hadn't even considered. This illustrates that some rare bird reports are due to misidentifications.

Another place where unreported avian visitors may hide is in large tracts of private land that few have access to. While hiking on relatively inaccessible United States Forest Service land behind our neighborhood last July, we recorded an unseen mystery bird's song with a little digital camera. We later unraveled the mystery: it was an Ovenbird! Given the extremely late date, we are guessing that there is a breeding population. This summer we will be going back to see if they actually are breeding there, or if it was just a late migrant. Not only is that a very rare breeder in the county, but it also demonstrates that our knowledge of the avian world is very limited and that there is a lot more for us to learn ... far more than we could even imagine.

This May, my brother, Joel, found a Black-and-white Warbler in our neighbor's extensive, thorny thicket. He found it right when we were heading out the door to go to a bird lecture, so I didn't get to see it. The next morning we got up at the crack of dawn to search for it. To my great joy, we found it. Then we found it again the next day to our cousin's great joy. And then after that, we never saw it again. It was only there for three

days! These off-track migrants generally don't stick around for very long, so instead of solely chasing the rarities others find, go out and explore your area and find your own great birds! I find this much more gratifying than being the "follower." You learn more, and your knowledge of birds and nature is greatly expanded.

Another thing that is incredibly helpful with making credible reports is a camera. For example, take the "Krider's" Red-tailed Hawk my brother found last winter. He knew it was an unusual Red-tailed Hawk, and he suspected it was a Krider's, but without his photographic documentation, his suspicion would have been considered wishful thinking. His photographs were sent to some of the most well respected hawk experts in the country. They all agreed with the Krider's identification. After we posted the report on the local birding listserv, COBirds, we received e-mails from a couple people who said their own reports of Krider's Hawk had been dismissed as misidentifications. Though the Colorado Bird Records Committee hasn't finished reviewing his report, others say that this sighting is the best documented record of a Krider's Hawk in Colorado.

Regarding my original example of the Stonechat, who is to say that the other reported Krider's Hawk sightings were mere misidentifications? We will never be sure. Though proper documentation for science is necessary, it is still fun to imagine and dream about all of those birds that pass under the radar undetected.