



Some Background on "Not Accepted" Bird Sighting Reports

An Extract from the First Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee Report
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Just as the merits of individual bird sightings are frequently debated by members of the birding community, so have the roles of bird records committees been the subject of extensive debate. Unfortunately, the functions of bird records committees are frequently misunderstood. The general perception that these committees serve as "rarities police," whose only function is to sit in judgment over the sightings of other birders, is not accurate for the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC). This section discusses the current role of the MD/DCRC, how the committee has interacted with the birding community in the past, and how we hope to improve these interactions in the future.

At the outset, it is important to recognize that the function of the MD/DCRC is not to "prove" or "disprove" any report. Providing such proof is normally beyond our means. Additionally, **the fact that a report was not accepted does not mean that the bird in question was not present.** Rather, the committee provides a collective decision as to whether the available evidence supports the claimed identification at a certain threshold of confidence, a threshold that varies from member to member depending upon their experiences with the species in question. The significance of the record also has a very important influence on establishing this confidence threshold. The more difficult the identification, or the more unexpected the report on the basis of date or geography, the more cautious some members may be in accepting reports. The importance attributed to these factors may vary from species to species. A continuum exists within the committee, from members requiring the same high level of documentation for all reports to other members requiring less documentation for some species but much greater levels for others. There is no "right" or "wrong" approach, just nine individuals using their own philosophies to determine the confidence threshold of individual reports.

The most important function performed by the MD/DCRC is not its decisions on records, but the creation of a historical database documenting the status of rare birds in the area. As the number of records accumulates over the years, this database will provide valuable knowledge on avian vagrancy and range expansions. The documentation associated with these reports will allow future researchers to make their own assessments of the validity of the records, since the criteria used to identify some species fifty years from now may be very different from what is used today. Through their cooperation with the MD/DCRC, the birding community provides a very important historical record in a more scientific manner than in the past. This system is by no means perfect, but it allows individuals to assess the merits of each report in a more objective fashion, and not based solely on an observer's "reputation."

The MD/DCRC recognizes that its decisions are one of its important functions, but these decisions may have some undesired results such as discouraging observers from submitting additional reports. Observers who take the time to submit documentation to the committee certainly care whether or not their reports are accepted. Most people probably experience a mixture of anger and/or frustration when their report is not accepted, which is understandable. Service on the committee does not necessarily mean automatic acceptance of one's reports; most committee members have one or more sightings in the list of "Not Accepted" reports. While removing one's ego from the process may not be entirely possible, it is a worthwhile goal. Feedback makes a person a better birder in the future, and an increased awareness of identification information available in the literature makes one more likely to provide better documentation.

To that end, the committee tries to provide observers with better information about the rationale used in its decisions.

The most important factor influencing the acceptance of a report is the "available evidence," not the philosophies of individual committee members. When the available evidence is compelling, even the most skeptical committee members readily vote for acceptance. The type of information necessary to exceed a member's confidence threshold certainly varies from species to species. Photographs, video tapes, and audio recordings are very helpful in the committee's deliberations, and by themselves may provide adequate documentation for many reports. For other reports, these materials may be insufficient to establish a bird's identity and must be supplemented with written descriptions. Obtaining photographs may not be possible in many cases, for which written documentation provides the evidence reviewed by the committee. While a combination of photographic and written documentation provides the ideal types of evidence to support a report, reports supported only by photographs or only by written documentation are given equal consideration by the committee.

An important component of written documentation is the description of the bird. This point may seem self-evident, yet some documentation received by the committee provides very brief and inadequate descriptions. A simple listing of several important field marks may not be very helpful, as these field marks may eliminate some but not all of the similar species. Statements such as "the bird had a typical tail pattern of an immature Mew Gull (*Larus canus*)" are not nearly as useful as an actual description of the color pattern on the tail. Hence, observers should try to provide descriptions of the entire bird including characteristics that may not seem important at the time of the observation. While the preparation of written documentation requires a fair amount of time, this time is well spent as it frequently results in improved identification skills and appreciation for the amount of variation exhibited in bird plumages. While the committee does not expect to receive voluminous descriptions for easily identified species such as Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*), detailed descriptions are essential for difficult to identify species such as stints (*Calidris* sp.) or vagrant empidonax (*Empidonax* sp.) flycatchers.

An equally important component of written documentation is a description of the circumstances under which the observation occurred. The better each committee member understands the circumstances of the observation, the more comfortable and confident they become in evaluating the described field marks.

For reports that are not accepted, the available evidence may not mention certain important field marks or may suggest that the conditions of the sighting did not permit for the proper study of all necessary field marks. Only in rare instances does the available evidence suggest to the committee that a species was misidentified.

These examples illustrate the importance of providing complete descriptions of all species subject to committee review, and also explain why the committee no longer considers some of the "older" records acceptable. The standards of "available evidence", used to accept sightings, have evolved within bird records committees. In the past, an observer's reputation was the primary factor used to determine the acceptability of a report. If persons were believed to be reliable observers, then all of their reports were generally accepted even though the details and circumstances of the identifications remained unknown. Reports from newer birders were frequently omitted until their reputations were "proven." Today, bird records committees operate differently, requiring documentation for all rarities whether they are observed by the most experienced birders or by beginners. A birder's reputation by itself, in the absence of acceptable documentation, will never cause a report to be accepted.