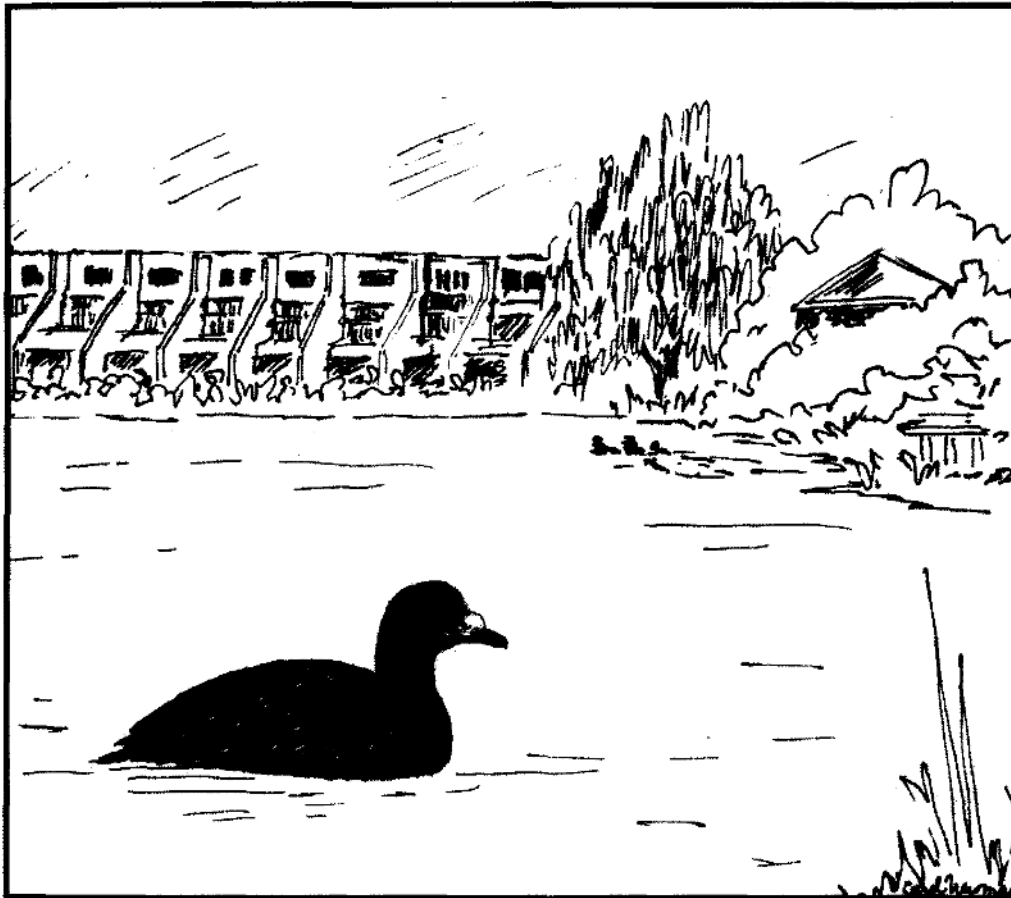


ISSN 0147-9725

MARYLAND BIRDLIFE



Bulletin of the Maryland Ornithological Society, Inc.

**MARCH 1992
VOLUME 48
NUMBER 1**

EMERGING FROM THE SILENT MAJORITY: DOCUMENTING RARITIES

CLAUDIA WILDS AND ROBERT HILTON

Ever found a rare bird? What did you do? Many people do nothing at all, perhaps thinking that no one will believe them. A minimal step, if you are birding in a park or refuge, is to put it on the wildlife sighting sheet. That way somebody else might see the bird too, and report it to a birding hotline or take notes on it and send them to the appropriate rarities committee. Or you might call a knowledgeable birder you know and let that person decide what to do. With a little more self-confidence you might call the nearest birders' hotline yourself and subject yourself to questions by the operator.

Making contact with anybody on this subject takes courage, unless you are such a novice that you expect your report to be accepted without question. With more experience you know that your identification, like that of any other birder, will be challenged and you will have to defend it. (After all, rare birds are not supposed to be here. The odds are good that you have confused it with a species that *is* supposed to be here, perhaps one in a plumage with which you are unfamiliar.) If you are not convincing, your report may be met with skepticism or incredulity, and you may decide never to report a rare bird again.

That is a pity, because any active birder will come across several—perhaps many—rare birds that should get into the record books. Quite aside from the pleasure of providing excitement for fellow birders and getting some credit for it, the real value of reporting a rarity is the contribution to scientific knowledge: increasing the understanding of patterns of vagrancy or documenting the first stages of expansion of a species' range or (sadly) the last records of a disappearing species. The more information contained in a report, the more value it has to people interested in distribution and conservation. Detailed notes can demonstrate to future researchers that a certain species actually occurred at a given place and time. A report not accepted immediately could be validated at a later date as additional information about field characters or distribution patterns accrues.

There is a myth that the only birders with credibility in a state are a group of elitists who believe all of each other's reports and none from anybody else. Not true—everybody runs into skepticism, and everyone can learn to write an acceptable report. If there *were* an insiders' club it would be wide open for membership. Anyone could join who repeatedly reported the rarities he or she discovered and had at least some of them confirmed by experienced birders. Experienced observers show the patience to spot easily overlooked birds (rare ones that look a lot like common ones), and make a conscientious effort to submit documentation on rarities to a local records committee.

What is good documentation? A dead bird taken to a natural history museum and stored there as a prepared specimen, tagged as to date, location, and finder is an almost impossible and usually undesired solution for most birders. Next best is a photograph or series of photographs showing all the details needed to identify the bird conclusively. Because most birders don't have cameras or long lenses, and even those who do can never be certain that the photographs *will* show everything, or will even come out right, the basic requirement for every report is a set of notes *taken in the field*. Whether you just want to get your bird onto a rare bird alert or you want to establish a first state record, you need to have a notebook and a pen or pencil in your pocket whenever you go birding.

So you see the bird. Then what? Look at it closely, not taking your eyes off it until you have told yourself (put into words in your head) every feature you can see (and hear, if you are lucky). This includes not only the diagnostic fieldmarks but the details that paint a verbal portrait of that individual. Then take pictures, if you have a camera, or write down your mental words, or both (taking the pictures first). If you can sketch the bird, do so. Even if you are hopelessly inept as an artist, you may be able to draw a wing or tail pattern or a bill shape or pattern. If similar birds are in the vicinity, write down its differences from them. When you have run out of things to say about its appearance, record its behavior, including posture, and try to transcribe or describe its vocalizations.

If you are with other birders, do not assume that they will write notes, though you might encourage them to do so. If several of you are taking notes at the same time, the ideal procedure is for each person to write details without influencing the others. A suggestion to look at the eye-ring, for example, helps focus attention on a potentially key identification mark, whereas a statement that the eye-ring is quite striking may influence the content of the documentation. Similarly, consulting references during the note-writing process can suggest the presence of features that are not actually present. Resist the temptation to record what you "know" is there. In a group situation, different observers' notes will be different. Do not worry about missing a detail that someone else recorded—your notes will have value as an independent document.

At any time the bird may leave you, of course. That is why it is important to verbalize right away what your eyes see. Most of us do not have a photographic memory that would enable us to reconstruct later the precise details from a general impression.

The points that can wait until after the bird has gone are the notes on your distance from the bird, the relative position of the bird, the sun, and you, the habitat, exact location, time and date, the optics you used, the names of your fellow observers, and your previous experience with the species.

The hardest habit to break is looking at your field guide when you should be looking at the bird and writing down what it looks like. Force yourself to leave the books alone, at least until you have written the best description you can. If you add anything to your notes after consulting field guides, indicate which features were prompted by looking at the books (and specify which books).

Your notes may be a disorganized mess, but they are the core of your documentation. You will probably want to write up a neat, coherent version of them. Just don't leave out any detail. (Do make a note of features not observed, though, if you are aware of them.) Armed with notes (and photos, if you have them), you can answer any challenger's questions with confidence and accuracy, within the limits of what you were able to observe.

You will find this whole procedure not nearly as intimidating as it sounds if you prepare yourself for an unexpected rarity in two ways. First, memorize the terminology describing the parts of a bird in one of your field guides. In the introductory section they all have a bird or two with the parts labeled. Most of the guides supply a simplified terminology suitable for beginning users. In our opinion, the most complete, precise, and useful set of terms is found inside the front and back covers of Kenn Kaufman's *Advanced Birding* (Houghton Mifflin 1990). Second, after learning the terminology, practice on the local birds in your yard or neighborhood, and force yourself to describe

one bird every time you go out birding (a songbird one day, a raptor the next, a shorebird or waterbird the next, and so on).

If you have documented a species on the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee's list for review, send the secretary a photocopy of your field notes (as well as a tidied up version, if you like) and copies of photos, if any. The neat version need not be a well-written narrative suitable for publication. If the subject is worthy of an article in *Maryland Birdlife*, you can later add colorful prose that evokes the whole experience or provides information about the distribution of the species in the region, but only the details about the bird and the observation are important to reviewers of the record.

To illustrate what serious efforts at documentation may look like and how the committee analyzes them, we present and critically assess two records that have been reviewed.

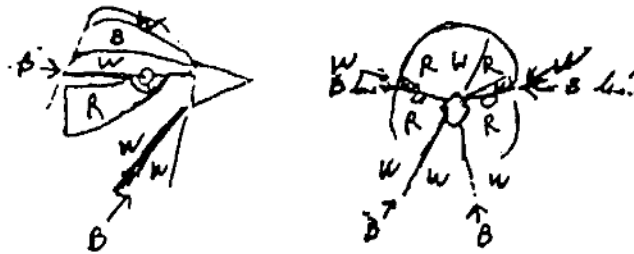
Read the reports and decide how you would have evaluated them before turning to page 34 and finding out what the committee decided and why. Think carefully about whether each observer included all the information you need. Did they eliminate the possibility that a different species might have been under observation? Can you visualize exactly what the bird looked like? If not, what is missing from the description? Does that make a difference in your decision?

Lark Sparrow

W-white

B-black

R-reddish brown
(rufous)



Elliott Drive, less than 100 yards south of Tridelphia Mill Road, Clarksville, MD.

Howard County book map p. 13, block K6.

Bluebird-size sparrow seen with a flock of House Finches at first at 1732 hours for 3 min. on 10-12-88. Temp. in low 40s.

Body white underneath with small black spot on breast, white throat with black whiskers, brown back with no wingbars.

Black line through eye, sparrow bill.

Rufous cheek patches.

White 1/2 ring under eye.

Alternating rufous and white bands on top of head.

Yellowish-brown bill and legs.

Came out of a weedy field on west side of street and landed in sapling above weeds and bush on east side and turned to face me.

In flight took a few flaps and then glided.

Slower wing beat than most sparrows.

Some white on tail, but bird didn't show me a clear view of the type of tail. No obvious wingbars seen.

Bird seen in full sun most of the time, observer looking east, range less than 50 feet, sky partly cloudy. Moderate wind from west.

Used 7 x 50 binoculars while sitting in pickup truck.

[Transcribed directly from notes taken in the field.]

Franklin's Gull

On Sunday, October 27, 19—, I met X— at Loch Raven reservoir. X— had been making a series of observations from a point of land on the north shore of the lake, and I was anxious to learn of the spot. During the fall X— had seen a Piping Plover there on September 27 and, beginning on October 10, Laughing Gulls. The Laughing Gulls had built to a population of 48 birds by October 25, although none were present on October 26.

At 10 a.m., X—, Y—, Z—, and I met at the reservoir, and X— led us through the woods to a point of land that jutted out into the lake, just east of the main Dulaney Valley bridge, at the north side of the lake. About 50 feet offshore was a very small island that had been exposed because of the abnormally low water conditions. On the island were 2 Great Black-backed Gulls, 6 Herring Gulls, and several dozen Ring-billed Gulls. As the others began to search for waterfowl, I noticed a flock of birds that were just pin dots through my binoculars, high in the sky to the east. Using my 30-power telescope, I could make out what I thought to be a flock of Laughing Gulls. Soon they began to spiral downward, and within a few minutes they had reached the water level and were flying toward the island. Upon alighting, they were identified as 13 adult and 2 juvenile Laughing Gulls.

Over the past few years I have grown accustomed to meticulously examining every bird that I see in a flock. This I began to do with the flock of gulls in front of me on the island. Soon I noticed a smaller bird among the laughers. I advised the others, and soon all four scopes were trained on the island about 50 yards away. I told them that I thought I had a Franklin's Gull. The characteristics that separated this bird from the Laughing Gulls were easy to see, since a Laughing Gull was immediately behind the bird in question. Differences were noted as follows: first, the bird was in adult, non-breeding plumage, as was the nearby Laughing Gull. Most notable was the size difference. The Franklin's was about 20 percent smaller, with obviously shorter legs and a smaller, sligher bill. The color of the mantle was a half-shade lighter than the Laughing Gulls. (I had never noticed this difference before, but subsequent research has shown this to be true.) The spectacle-like white eye ring was outstanding, and the nape and side of head were covered with dark gray feathers that appeared like a partial hood. All of these field marks were compared with the neighboring Laughing Gulls. We are all convinced that we observed a Franklin's Gull, a first for Maryland's piedmont.

The large flock of Laughing Gulls was itself an unusual occurrence in this location, and the Franklin's Gull even more so. One must assume that the Franklin's arrived on the island with the Laughing Gulls, since only large gulls were on the island when we arrived. Whether the high-flying flock was migrating, or whether it represented some of the Laughing Gulls seen by X— two days before (but not the day before) can only be speculated. My four previous observations of Franklin's Gull in Baltimore County have all occurred within the September 20-October 27 period. Apparently there is a late fall migration that pushes this bird to the east coast during this time period.

The Lark Sparrow report, though terse, was complete, and it convinced all members of the committee of its accuracy on its first circulation.¹ As one member wrote:

"The combination of features is compelling: white belly, black breast spot, black whiskers and eyeline, rufous cheeks and head stripes, lack of wingbars, white in the tail. Bluebird size is good, too."

The head sketches and the precise details of location, time, length of observation, light conditions, distance, weather, and optics in addition to the details of appearance and behavior make this a model record.

An adult Lark Sparrow, of course, is not a difficult bird to identify, but the exactness with which this individual was described by Mark Wallace exemplifies the kind of verbal portrait that answers the questions that any report of a rarity raises.

The Franklin's Gull record, though much longer, is not nearly so detailed in respect to essential information. On the first circulation most committee members voted for it, but questions and doubts emerged from the comments. "I am not entirely convinced that the bird was not a Florida first-winter Laughing Gull. These birds aren't much different in size from a Franklin's Gull. The description given of the partial hood sounds a bit like either species and doesn't convince." "I am curious why nothing about the wing pattern was noted: no conspicuous white markings? Was the bird extremely worn, or molting? Why was it considered an adult? Could it have been in first-summer plumage?" "The description does not describe the hood clearly as more extensive than those of the laughers, which would be showing more variation in head pattern at this time. The white apical spots on the primaries should be larger than those of the laughers."

On the second round the vote changed to 4-4. A new committee member noted: "Diagnostic field marks are lacking. The shorter legs and slighter bill would be expected of a bird 20 percent smaller, and size alone cannot be convincing for a gull of unknown sex. There is much more variability in size among Laughing Gulls than between Laughers and Franklin's. The eye ring and hood remnants could belong to either species. The birds were watched in flight as they approached the island, but no one at that time noticed the characteristic wing pattern of a Franklin's."

With half the committee still supporting the record, it was given a third chance. This time the number of negative votes reached five, and the record was assigned to the "not accepted" category. The cumulative doubts about whether the information that had been provided (or not provided) on the size, head pattern, and wingtips eliminated Laughing Gull outweighed the case for Franklin's Gull, with which the details were certainly compatible.

This report was submitted by a Records Committee member. Although he was (or should have been) aware of the level of detail needed for acceptance, anyone can forget to put in some important facts, especially if no field notes are taken on the spot. We don't know if that is what happened in this case. What we do know is that no copy of any field notes was submitted with the narrative and that none of the other three observers sent descriptions to the Records Committee. The failure of this record may have been a problem only of exposition, but there is no way to know whether the observers talked about the wing pattern or even thought about this key character.

Compare the polished after-the-event presentation of this report with the immediacy of the Lark Sparrow notes and see for yourself what was missing in one and present in the other. Then make a habit of taking your pen and notebook into the field and get your birding friends and

¹The voting procedure of the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee is as follows: to be accepted or rejected on the first round, the votes on a record must be unanimous. To be accepted on the second round, they must also be unanimous. Records with up to four negative votes go on to a third round. On the third round a record is accepted if it receives no more than one negative vote. Records with two negative votes (but no more) on the third round are discussed in a committee meeting and later given one last chance to be accepted, with one negative vote allowed on a fourth round

companions to do the same. Remember that photocopies of everybody's notes (or even those of a single observer) scribbled on the spot are more likely to provide the committee with the observations it needs to make its decisions than an account based on a recollection, even one just a few hours old. Above all, remember that your reports are invited and appreciated, that the most well-known birders have had (and continue to have) reports not accepted, and that the most unknown birders have had reports accepted. The only rarity sightings that have no chance at all of becoming records are the ones kept secret from the Records Committee.

*3331 N Street NW, Washington, DC 20007
2614 Woodley Place NW, Washington, DC 20008*