

Guidelines for rarities committees

Compilation of the Texel Guidelines and the Helgoland-, Kekskemet-, Blahova- and Lednice Minutes

Introduction

An unusual bird sighting in a given area does not necessarily constitute a scientifically insignificant event. Such cases can be of interest in the context of migration, orientation behaviour and range extension, and as consequences of weather patterns. They have to be carefully documented to be useful in contributing to answer scientific questions.

There are numerous examples of rare bird records which, according to the knowledge of that time, were considered insignificant deviations from the norm but which later proved to be signs of a newly recognised phenomenon. Only long-term documentation at a high standard can reveal such patterns which may be of special interest in the light of rapid environmental changes.

The recent enormous rise in bird(watch)ing activity and improvement in field identification have not only led to a steep increase in rare-bird reports but also facilitate their documentation. The sighting of a rare bird is only the first step in establishing a record: evidence must be submitted to an independent committee. Such rarities committees, now well established in many countries worldwide, provide a valuable service to the field observers and the scientific community alike by scrutinising records, publishing them in annual reports and putting on (generally accessible) file all information pertaining to observations of rare birds.

In many older and still too many contemporary publications, such observations or claims have not been checked by a competent committee and lack any form of publicly available documentation. These cases are scientifically worthless and should no longer burden the ornithological literature.

Rarities committees are not made mainly to verify claims of twitchers or to produce long country lists. The occurrence of rarities is a biological phenomenon to be studied like any other part of ornithology. Thus, it has to be treated in the same way: from a scientific point of view. The listing of records is just the beginning but probably the part birders enjoy most. The neglected and most important part is to use this knowledge in further research. If one looks at rarities in this way, it becomes evident that a scientist can work only with proven or substantiated records, not with claims or unverified reports. One recklessly accepted report may distort a whole pattern of occurrence.

To reveal such patterns, especially in very rarely occurring species, the analysis of records from vast areas is essential. Therefore, close cooperation among European rarities committees is necessary. Every rarities committee (or, better, every scientist working in field ornithology) in Europe must be able to trust the decisions of any other rarities committee. This objective is best served by a standardised method for checking reports and reaching clear decisions. This method should be used in every European country (or even worldwide).

To state it more bluntly, ornithology is a science and not a playground for listers. Rarities committees are responsible for the decisions they publish.

Guidelines

- A rarities committee should work **independently** (from societies or sponsoring organisations).
- A rarities committee should consist of at least five **members**, independently of the size of the country. It does not seem to be necessary or even useful to have more than ten members. Periodic rotation of all members is advisable. Members should be elected by the committee. Every member should have qualifications that contribute to the work of the committee, e.g. extensive field experience, knowledge of the current literature, skills in ringing or in examining museums skins and knowledge of the current birding scene.
- **Decisions** should be reached unanimously or nearly so. A record should not be accepted with more than one negative vote. There should be a provision to allow reconsideration of any record.
- There are different ways to **circulate reports** but two seem preferable. Every member receives a copy of the documentation and comes to an independent decision which is submitted to the secretary. If the opinions diverge, a report will be sent out again (with the arguments for and against it) until accepted or rejected with at least two negative votes in the third circulation. The second way is that one member gives a first statement, then sends it to the next member, who agrees or disagrees, writing his/her opinion under the first statement,

and so on. If, in the end, there are conflicting opinions, the file will circulate again. Difficult cases can be discussed in meetings of the full committee.

- Whenever possible, **the first** (or preferably the first five) records should be **proved** by photographs, video films or tape recordings. In some cases, descriptions by highly qualified observers might suffice.
- All national rarities committee should give **reasons for non acceptance** of a record on request to the appropriate birdwatcher.
- All committee, consultants and specialist **comments** should be confidential prior to publication of any decisions. Information concerning records under consideration, or decisions prior to publication, or other committee matters should normally not be discussed outside the committee, except through the secretary or chairman to whom all outside enquiries should be directed.
- **Reports of rarities committees** should be published every year. All the relevant information on a record should be given when available (species/subspecies, date, place, province, number of individuals, age, sex, names of responsible observers, documentation (photographs, video films, tape recordings), bird caught or found dead, in which case locality of the specimen and collection number). An **English summary** should always be included as well as the AERC Homepage address <http://aerc.mypage.org>
- The **first** (or preferably the first five) **records should always be published** in detail in a national (not regional) journal, including full description and photographs (even if of poor quality), with an English summary. The full documentation of every record should be kept on permanent file and made publicly accessible.
- The annual report should give the **numbers** of previous records and individuals for each species. It should be clearly stated in the report and in the English summary which period these figures refer to (1800-1949, since 1950 or since the committee began to work...) .
- A list of **species that are considered by the committee** should be published periodically and be available on the WorldWideWeb and upon request.
- The following **categories** should be used for the national lists:
 - A** - species which has been recorded in an apparently wild state at least once since 1.1.1950
 - B** - species which has been recorded in an apparently wild state only between 1800 and 1949
 - C** - released or escaped species which has established a self-supporting breeding population in the own country; also birds coming from a category C population of another country (with the species not breeding in the own country).
 - D** - every species unless it is almost certainly a genuine vagrant (in which case it enters Cat. A), or almost certainly an escape from captivity (Cat. E).
 - E** - escapes from captivityCategory D should always be published in the annual report, even if it is not a part of the national list. Category E should be kept in file and published to help other European countries to evaluate the possibilities of escapes.
- Every rarities committee should check the **old exceptional records**. In particular, reports of difficult species for which new identification criteria have been established should be reconsidered.
- Every rarities committee should take care that **rejected reports** are not referred to in the **literature**.
- If a committee has difficulties in judging a report with respect to identity or origin, it should ask **specialists** for help instead of reaching an unsatisfactory decision.
- In case of reports of **birds crossing a national borderline** the Rarities committees concerned should exchange the documentations and decisions before publication. If an unanimous decision cannot be reached, the report should be rejected by both countries. Every rarities committee should **send its annual reports** to every other committee in Europe.
- Every national rarities committee should have its own **national homepage** with an updated list of species that must be reported. These national homepages should also include information on Category E species in that country.
- Every national rarities committee should provide their data to the AERC on request (in a compatible format).