

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SIGHT RECOGNITION*

By Ludlow Griscom

Period I: First of all, there was no such thing as a sight record. Ornithology really got going in the late sixties and seventies of the last century and was followed by a period of unrestricted collecting and shooting. There were also sportsmen collectors who were only interested in getting ducks and the various game birds, which in those times included practically all water birds, hawks, and owls. The literature is stuffed with innumerable errors based on specimens erroneously identified: The Blue Geese turned out to be immature Lesser Snows, the Golden Eagles were Bald Eagles, the rare Philadelphia Vireos were Tennessee Warblers, the American Three-toed Woodpeckers were Hairy Woodpeckers with yellow crown-spots, and Bohemian Waxwings were nothing but Cedars with some white feathers in the wings! For identification all small birds were automatically shot, and no reasonable man should have any quarrel with the people trained in this school for their attitude and their point of view.

Period II: The decline of general collecting and the beginning of the era of protection and conservation.

Laws of steadily increasing severity exterminated the lucrative profession of taxidermy. Spring shooting of game birds was abolished and an increasing series of restrictive laws greatly reduced the category of game birds in many different directions. Some of this was regarded as quite disastrous by the older ornithologists, and Witmer Stone records the amusing story of a conversation he had with Daniel Giraud Elliot, who in his late eighties mourned the decline of ornithology! Stone, as editor of the *Auk* and active with the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club at Philadelphia, was well aware that never previously in the history of the world had there been such a boom as was then taking place in ornithology! And, of course, what Elliot had in mind was the decline of general collecting, as that was the only way known to him by which younger people could acquire competent knowledge and experience.

Period III: The first appearance of sight records from 1900 on.

As a young man interested in local faunistics, I was told by both Dwight and Chapman to study Brewster's *Birds of the Cambridge Region* as an example of how a local fauna should be done. I did so. Brewster's criteria now seem to us exceedingly severe and almost unreasonable. Sight records of rare birds relatively easy to identify were accepted, provided that the maker was known to be an experienced observer and provided that he had previous acquaintance in

*Supplied from the files of Gordon M. Meade. Details unknown except that internal evidence indicates it probably was written in 1953.

life with such rare birds. Mr. Brewster did not hesitate to give sight records of rare birds of his own, but he was always most careful to state that he was thoroughly familiar with this species in life in other parts of the United States where he also had had field experience. With the passage of time everybody accepted his statements, as everybody knew that he had indeed had the field experience he claimed. It was this that started me off on my own chase of a large life list from 1907 on—for which I have been teased all my life—as in reporting rare birds I, too, wished to be able to say that I knew this bird well from field experience in other sections of the country.

Mr. Brewster has published a charming letter written to him on January 20, 1905, about a sight record of a Glaucous Gull, then so rare a bird in Massachusetts that every case was a matter of record. The youthful author, in reciting his observation, closed with the following remark: "While I do not feel this observation was conclusive, . . . I still believe the bird to be a Glaucous Gull." Brewster writes: "While this observation was certainly *not* conclusive," The youthful author of the letter was Glover M. Allen, soon to attain a national reputation as an ornithologist!

The next point I wish to make is that the reporting of an observation required some similar phrase of humility, which was exacted from all young men reporting sight records of birds in my youth. I asked myself the rhetorical question: What was the matter with this observation, and why was it certainly not conclusive? The answer is that there was no specimen, no good glasses were used, because none existed, and there was no comparison with other species, such as the Herring or Great Black-backed Gull. While this lack of favorable circumstances of observation was certainly not the observer's fault, you just had to wait until this happened to you!

In December, 1911, I persuaded the late Waldron DeWitt Miller to visit Gardiner's Island, Long Island, with me in search of rare ducks and other sea birds. I wish here to pay tribute of my indebtedness to Miller for many valuable experience pointers in the field and to state how much I feel I owe him. But as we were going down in the train to Greenport, I chattered happily about what birds we might expect to see, and I was so rash as to mention that we ought to find the Red-throated, as well as the Common Loon. Miller immediately interrupted me and said in a displeased tone of voice, "Everybody knows that these species are inseparable in life." I find from my journal that we saw one Red-throated Loon on December 1, five on the 2nd, and two on the 3rd, and one specimen in excellent condition was found dead on the beach and collected. Mr. Miller's notes read, "One specimen collected, others believed seen."

I may now mention that on this trip we found a Black Guillemot on one of the ponds, had a most excellent observation, and it was Miller who first identified this bird and who proved that it could not be a White-winged Scoter. This bird has never been mentioned for

forty-two years, and I now wish to give the reasons, as proof of the type of training that I had to undergo in my youth and the rigid discipline that was exacted from a young man starting in ornithology. The guillemot was at that time the rarest of winter stragglers to Long Island, and December 3 appeared too early a date. That is *Item 1*. *Item 2*: Neither of us had ever seen the guillemot alive before. *Item 3*: The guillemot was in full *summer* plumage instead of *winter* plumage. (It was forty years later that a published revision of the guillemots showed delayed moult in this species to be very common.) Those are the reasons why Miller and I most carefully suppressed this guillemot record for so long a period of time. And the point is also psychological; when people were known to have suppressed what they were convinced they actually saw, they were believed when they finally did publish a sight record.

I have recently heard from a friend, not a collector, that he once sent an article to the *Auk* containing a list of the birds from some mountain locality in Pennsylvania. He made the frightful mistake of reporting the Louisiana Waterthrush as a common summer resident (which it undoubtedly was) and the Northern Waterthrush as a common spring and fall transient (which it also was), and the editor of the *Auk* refused the article on the ground that "everybody knows that the two species of waterthrushes are inseparable in life." Similarly, it was not believed that anybody studying the warbler migrations in spring could walk through the woods identifying the various species in the treetops, including all the particularly rare transients. This was proved by the late Louis B. Bishop, of Connecticut, who was good enough to look into it and who went out with younger members of the New Haven Bird Club. Whenever they said, "There is a male Blackburnian Warbler in the treetop," Bishop promptly shot it, and, to his great surprise, it turned out to be a Blackburnian Warbler! Both Brewster in the Nuttall Club and Dwight in the Linnaean Society would not hesitate to put younger men through the third degree about the sight records that they reported at the meetings. If a young man was frightened and tongue-tied and was unable to give his reasons for his identification, he was indeed seriously out of luck; but if, on the other hand, he was able to speak up and give the true facts, they were both fair and courteous gentlemen, and would say in public that the characters given were indeed very well and correctly described.

By way of summary, as I look back on my own life I regard this as a magnificent piece of training, even if at times it was unpleasant and disagreeable. Younger people must remember that in dealing with techniques previously unheard of, they had to be established and validated. This inevitably took time, and it was even harder on the older ornithologists of the collecting period, who couldn't possibly acquire this technique themselves. It is much harder, in terms of common humanity, to expect an older and more experienced man to admit that a younger and less experienced man can do something that he can't do.

The next period might be regarded as the period of success. Thanks to automobiles, improved field glasses, spotting scopes, the matchless Peterson guides, and colored plates of every species of North American birds readily available to everyone, we have seen what might be called the victory for the struggle of sight records. I should like to call your attention to the splendid summary by Witmer Stone in *Birds of Old Cape May*. He no longer worries about whether or not the two waterthrushes are separable in life, and he doesn't even bother to cite whether or not specimens of any of these commoner birds exist in the collections of the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences. In other words, the struggle for sight records took about twenty-five years.

We pass now automatically to what I wish to call present-day problems. We are living in an *era of superficiality*. Excellent as Peterson's guides in fact are, they are guides and not encyclopedias to our knowledge of North American birds. My point is, that there are many real facts about North American birds which the users of Peterson's guides and other popular manuals never acquire, and it must be admitted by the fair-minded that in the old collecting days those facts were acquired by students from the constant handling of specimens. I wish to give an illustration of what I mean by "superficiality." I have in mind the story of a young student who spent his summer college vacation motoring out to the prairies of northern North Dakota, where he was taken by a refuge manager to an island where some forty thousand Franklin's Gulls were nesting. It cannot, therefore, be doubted that he saw Franklin's Gulls and that he added the species to his life list perfectly legitimately. Six weeks later he joined my party down at Monomoy. There on the beach within shot-gun range, and standing between two Laughing Gulls, was a perfect adult Franklin's Gull, which he was unable to recognize, spot, or identify. My point is, that he really knew nothing about the Franklin's Gull and could not have given its various characters of identification properly from memory.

Just as Witmer Stone said in the work already cited, we now have hordes of incompetent and inexperienced observers, whose activities in birding consist primarily in an increasingly frantic effort to secure the credence of so-called higher authorities for rarities which they say they see. We are constantly getting a flood of these incompetent sight records in the literature, and the country is now so full of one type or another of bird bulletins that it is impossible for the private individual to secure a complete collection, nor is it possible for them to be reviewed in the standard ornithological magazines. This has been followed by what might be termed a decline of censorship and healthy skepticism. Actually, it is impossible for Brewster's criteria to be followed out in the present day and age. I have tried it myself in Massachusetts and it cannot be done. It is impossible to know everybody who is interested in birds, to arrange to go out in the field with everybody and size up their competence and experience, nor is it any

longer possible to state categorically, as Brewster was able to do, that such a person was previously unfamiliar with the species in life. You cannot keep track of everybody's life list any more, nor can you keep a list of all the people who have window feeding stations for birds, where something rare or unusual might turn up at any moment.

I do not profess to know what the future solution will be, as it cannot conceivably be worked out in my own lifetime, but I wish to conclude with an earnest plea for my favorite science. I don't wish it to fall into disrepute because the so-called battle of sight records has been won. Whether we like it or not, popular bird study has come to stay. People will chase rarities with their field glasses just as they did with their guns in earlier times. It is impossible and unreasonable to expect that everyone will become a convert to the scientific methods of ornithology, or that they will all secure collecting permits in the interest of science. Some means must be found to prevent local faunistics from being by-passed as amateurish, unscientific, and unworthy of serious attention and study. There is a desperate need for severe, careful, and competent screening and censoring.



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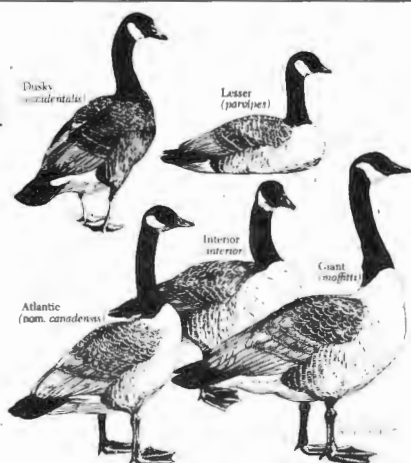
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