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Writing a Documentation

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WRITING A DOCUMENTATION

As the previous article makes clear, the written documentation helps birdwatchers communicate clearly about unusual sightings. Preparing the report can even add to the excitement of the event as one settles into a comfortable chair with the field notes and paper, chortling "Wait 'til they read about this!" Then one relives the whole experience while organizing one's thoughts for

writing.

Those field notes are an important part of the process, for they keep small but critical details accurate. Train yourself to take some kind of notebook or paper into the field, though in a pinch the margin of a field guide or the back of a shopping list will do. Write notes while looking at a bird or as soon afterwards as possible. Since you will make notes as the bird's characteristics become apparent to you, your field notes will be disorganized and repetitive, not to mention illegible. That's fine; no one but you need ever see them.

Take notes as soon as possible and preferably before consulting a field guide or while consulting a guide and also watching the bird. Memory is profoundly modified by expectations (see the extensive literature on problems with eyewitness testimony in criminal trials), so it is important to get your impressions down on paper quickly, before tricky memory rewrites the whole thing.

In the documentation itself, the first thing to write down is the "bare bones" of the sighting: date, location, species seen, number of birds seen, and name(s) of the observer(s).

Next write the birds description. Write down everything you see, including characteristics you consider trivial. (They may matter to others later.) On the other hand, write down only what you yourself see. For example, if you see the bird from the back do not describe its front, even though you may know what it must look like. If you know birds well you will find it surprisingly difficult to limit yourself to what you really see, for your mind will "helpfully" supply missing details.

If you and others pool information to write one documentation from all of you, make this clear. Separate documentations from each of you will be more useful and convincing.

Start your description with a general statement of the bird's size and shape. This need not be any marvel of geometry. Write something like "a duck a little smaller than a Mallard", or "a Robin-sized bird with a long tail". It is actually easier to believe a size description if it is put in terms of other birds rather than in inches.

This general statement of size and shape provides the reader with an outline that you will now fill in with the details of shape and color pattern. I prefer to organize my thoughts by starting at the front and working back over the top of the bird, then starting at the front again and working back along the underparts. Specifically, I ask myself: bill (shape and color)?, face?, eyes?, crown?, back?, wings?, rump?, tail?, throat? breast?, belly?, legs?, undertail coverts?. Write in detail, but obviously you will not see all these parts on all the birds you document.

Drawings may describe the bird more easily than words. Indeed, artists sometimes turn in documentations that are mainly detailed drawings. Most of us use words, but even so sketches can be useful. Even the crudest drawing may be invaluable in describing an important shape or the location of a critical spot.

Do not use the tempting short cut of saying "the bird looks like the picture on page ... of ..." and leaving it at that. The pictures in field guides are idealizations; no real bird looks like them in all details. The purpose of the documentation is to describe the individual bird in front of you. Of course, during a description you might find it useful to explain how the bird did or did not look like some particular picture. It's just that reference to a picture is not a substitute for a description.

The bird's behavior, voice, and habitat are all important and in some cases are more important than the bird's appearance. Write down whether the bird swims, hovers, climbs tree trunks, flycatches, runs, or hops. Does it perch in a tree, a bush, or grass stems, or on the ground? Does it scratch the ground for food with a hop like a towhee, or with one foot at a time like a quail? Did you see it in flight, perched, or what? Did it come to a feeder? Was it in woods, brush, a prairie, a cemetery, a cornfield? What did it eat, and how did it get the food? Describe any song or calls it made.

The next section of your documentation could be labeled "similar species". Here explain what other species are similar to the one you saw and how you told the difference. Consider all the possibilities, not just the one most similar species. For example, for a Peregrine Falcon start by explaining why it is a falcon, rather than an accipiter, buteo, harrier, or kite, then narrow your

focus to why it was a Peregrine and not one of our four other falcons. A few species (like Avocet or Scissor-tailed Flycatcher) are so distinctive that after a good description the "similar species" section may be limited to a statement that there aren't any. Think creatively, though; a Vermilion Flycatcher certainly looks like no other flycatcher in Nebraska but it has some resemblance to a Scarlet Tanager.

It is easy to feel that now you are done with the documentation, but you are not. A sighting is really an interaction between a bird, a person, and various other factors like light, weather, field guides, and optical equipment. Just describing the bird leaves most of the sighting a mystery to the reader and he may misunderstand it.

The second main part of a documentation is a description of the sighting. Make sure you note how far away the bird was. Most of us can not judge distance well, but perhaps you can compare the distance to something fairly standard, like the width of a county road or a city block. Sometimes I am reduced to writing something like "50 yards? (Guess)". It's better than nothing, though not by much.

Weather conditions like overcast, fog, precipitation, and wind can affect a sighting. Describe the weather. Explain the relationship between the bird, the sun, and you. As you looked at the bird was the sun behind you, behind the bird, or to the side?

Mention what optical equipment you used and its power.

Tell who else was there and what they thought about the bird's identification.

Explain what field guides and other sources of information you used and the relationship between the sighting, your notes, and the books. That is, explain how long after the sighting you wrote your field notes, whether you wrote the notes before or after consulting sources of information, and how any books affected your notes or the documentation.

And now maybe you are done. Mail a documentation to the appropriate person. Currently, in Nebraska send it to Wayne Mollhoff, 736 South Third, Albion, Nebraska 68620. If the documentation should also be published, you may wish to send a copy to R. G. Cortelyou, 5109 Underwood Avenue, Omaha, Nebraska 68132. For Iowa birds, send the documentation to Dr. Tom Kent, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

What birds should be documented? Any bird that seems really rare or out of place. If you suspect the bird you see is unusual, at least take notes on it and then check to see if it should be documented. Remember that birds common in one season may be really unusual in another. For example, a Yellowthroat or Chipping Sparrow in your yard in summer would be ordinary but one at the feeder in winter ought to be documented. Also document and perhaps get published nesting attempts by birds that do not normally nest in your area.

There are two variations on the documentation that you ought to know about. For some species, it is valuable to turn in "details of the sighting" without a whole big documentation. This means you should in a sentence or paragraph explain how you identified the bird. This is used for species that are certainly present here but are a little tricky to identify, like either dowitcher, shrikes in winter, the uncommon Common Tern, or Greater Scaup. Sending in details for these birds just signals the researcher that you know enough to take a little care in identifying the species, something that may not otherwise be obvious to a graduate student going through bird records fifty years from now.

The other type of documentation is the "feather by feather description". This merely starts with the type of description written for a normal documentation. Then the observer carefully describes the pattern on the feathers of each area of the body. Writing this is a long job and not often necessary. However, it is probably the only way to adequately describe such unlikely and difficult-to-identify species as Little Stint or Greenish Eleania, two species that will probably never turn up in the midlands.

To me the most valuable thing about any kind of documentation is that it opens lines of communication between the observer and other interested birders. If I see a rare bird I may call up friends and tell them all about it, but through a documentation I can reach birders who are distant in geography or time. The written description is on file so that anyone with questions

about the sighting can look it up and hopefully find the answers.

Of course, there are other ways to communicate usefully about birds. Photographs and recordings are valuable and even now specimens remain important in special cases. However, the written documentation is especially suitable to this era when concerns about conservation make us reluctant to harm birds but at the same time more people than ever are out looking at wildlife, seeing unusual birds, and discussing their unexpected finds.

--- Barbara L. Wilson, Route 1, Box 42, Hastings, Iowa 51540