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## A Reconsideration of the Florida Bird Records of H L Ferguson and J B Ellis

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**Ronald L. Mumme**, Department of Biology, Memphis State University, Memphis, Tennessee 38152. (Present address: Archbold Biological Station, P.O. Box 2057, Lake Placid, Florida 33852.)

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**A reconsideration of the Florida bird records of H. L. Ferguson and J. B. Ellis.**—A compiler or reviewer of regional records, although he may concentrate on recent ones, should also be alert to the possibility that older records, even though previously published and presumably carefully reviewed, may yet be invalid. Previous publications have, for example, discounted several records of H. H. Bailey, but other doubtful records seemingly have not been questioned by reviewers. This appears to be true of records attributed by Howell (1932) and subsequent writers to H. L. Ferguson and J. B. Ellis during the years 1912-20.

Because Ferguson and Ellis claimed to have collected many of the species involved, and because I have not encountered such specimens in visits to museums with the largest Florida collections, a request for information about their specimens was submitted to the *Ornithological Newsletter*. Replies came from Eleanor H. Stickney, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University (Ferguson), and Thomas C. Erdman, Richter Museum of Natural History, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay (Ellis). Neither of these museums contained specimens of Ferguson or Ellis collected in Florida, although the Richter Museum had nine egg sets collected by Ellis in Florida. Mrs. Stickney later obtained the address of Charles Ferguson, H. L. Ferguson's son, who told me of the Henry L. Ferguson Museum on Fishers Island, New York. However, the curator of that museum, Edwin H. Horning, was unable to find any of Ferguson's Florida specimens there. For these reasons, it seems in order to evaluate these Florida records more carefully, especially in the light of some 70 additional years of Florida ornithology. As Ferguson's records seem not to have been published elsewhere, the following quotations are from Howell (1932).

Brant (*Branta bernicula*): “. . . specimen, owned by H. L. Ferguson, of Sarasota, was taken at the mouth of the Aucilla River (date not recorded) from a flock of about 30 birds of the same species” (emphasis added). There are numbers of Brant records in Florida, but none in such large numbers, so the absence of the specimen seems critical.

Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*): “H. L. Ferguson reports having killed several in the Whitewater Lakes, near Cape Sable” (emphasis added). Goldeneyes, according to other sources, are scarcely more than accidental in extreme south Florida, and no specimen from there has come to light.

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*): “H. L. Ferguson reports the capture of a specimen in Biscayne Bay, November 25, 1916. . . .” (emphasis added). There may be no credible record of this sawbill in extreme south Florida, and no such specimen is known to me.

American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*): “H. L. Ferguson tells me that he killed two Avocets at Palm Beach Inlet in 1916” (emphasis added). Despite the species' status in Florida today, Howell (1932) considered it “casual” in the early 1900's.

Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*): “The records are as follows. . . Flamingo, one taken, June, 1916, by H. L. Ferguson. . . .” (emphasis added). This record seems more likely than the four preceding, but with no specimen at hand the species of ani could hardly be considered established.

Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*): “H. L. Ferguson states that he has collected this species at Cape Sable and at the Chassahowitzka River” (emphasis added). Of two other specimens reported by Howell (1932), the Cape Florida bird has not been located, and neither have Ferguson's. Otherwise, this owl is reported in Florida by a specimen from Key West and two poorly documented sight records, although there are two specimens from contiguous Grady County, Georgia (Stoddard 1978).

Various records of J. B. Ellis appeared in *The Oologist*, 1915-18, but the inclusion of some and omission (rejection?) of others by Howell (1932) is enigmatic. The following appear in his *Florida Bird Life*, all from the town of Chokoloskee (Collier Co.) in 1915: Winter Wren (*T. troglodytes*), 7 Oct.; Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*), 11 Oct.; Louisiana Waterthrush (*Seiurus motacilla*), 12 Oct.; Kentucky Warbler (*Oporornis formosa*), 25 Oct.; Bachman's Sparrow (*Aimophila aestivalis*), 12 Oct.; and 2 Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*), 11 Oct. All of these except the Kirtland's Warbler (!) were referred to as “specimens” (Ellis 1915). The Winter Wren and junco seldom occur so far south in Florida and the wren probably never on such an early date. Kirtland's Warbler was very rare even in those years. The Kentucky Warbler and waterthrush would be very late for those species.

Specimens claimed by Ellis that were omitted by Howell (1932), were two “Audubon Warblers” (*Dendroica coronata auduboni*), 21 Sept.; Purple Martin (*Progne subis*), 24 Sept.; two Mourning Warblers (*Oporornis philadelphia*), 30 Sept.; two Swainson's Thrushes (*Catharus ustulatus*), 11 Oct.; two “Canadian” Warblers (*Wilsonia canadensis*), 12 Oct.; and Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus borealis*), 12 Oct. All forms listed in this group except the martin and thrush range from very rare to accidental in south Florida, and Audubon's Warblers in September would be even less likely. Regarding another rarity in south Florida, Ellis did not mention specimens among his “numerous” (otherwise very rare!) Warbling Vireos (*Vireo gilvus*) on 11 Oct., but he did mention specimens of eight additional species known to occur regularly in south Florida (Ellis 1915).

An account of an albino Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura* (Ellis 1916), was mentioned in Howell's (1932) bibliography but not in the species account.

Also omitted by Howell (1932) were Ellis' (1917, 1918) comments on the status of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) in or near 1897 (“plentiful”) and around 1918 (an excavating pair), presumably in swamps north of Chokoloskee. Of the pair, he added “If some selfish person doesn't find these birds and kill them, to give to some

museum or private collection, this pair of birds will multiply." Yet he stated in the same note that he expected "to get a clutch of their eggs."

In order to amass such an assemblage of remarkable records in a single fall as Ellis claimed in 1915 an observer would have to be very knowledgeable *and* lucky. Just how reliable an observer was Ellis? A few comments in his first note (Ellis 1915) are revealing: "Number of Vireos and Warblers can't identify without killing them 9-25-15" (*sic*); "Humming Bird nesting 10-7-15" (note date); "a few Sparrows could not identify 1-11-15" (*sic*); "I have seen two Sparrows, several Vireos and Warblers and three Juncos not described in any literature I have." The last statement does not tell us whether all three groups, or just the juncos, were "not described . . ." It seems obvious that very little credence should be given to the records cited above.

I thank William B. Robertson, Jr., for mentioning some of these old records to me, Eleanor Stickney and Thomas Erdman for information about holdings in their museums, and Charles Ferguson and Edwin H. Horning.

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**Henry M. Stevenson**, 950 Briarcliff Road, Tallahassee, Florida 32308.

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