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## Editorial

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## EDITORIAL

Commencement speakers, clergymen, and other public speakers often ask us what contributions we are making to life, and rightly so. Are our lives selfishly pleasure-oriented, "grabbing for all the gusto" we can get, and unmindful of the needs of others? What are we leaving to posterity?

Is it not in order to ask ourselves the same question in the more narrow field of bird study? All of us enjoy seeing many species, especially rarities, but should our emphasis be almost entirely on list-building? Will ornithology be benefited by the knowledge that have seen X-number of species in one state or within one 12-month period, or even within our lifetime? For that matter, will we ourselves long be satisfied with purely self-centered goals? In the hope that most of us will not, I would like to suggest some ways in which each person may make some real contributions to ornithology.

1. *Making systematic counts.* In a time when increasing emphasis is focused on a deteriorating environment, we should not only be content to say that certain species of birds are decreasing, but we should be able to document what we say. To Sir Francis Galton is attributed the statement "When in doubt, count." Regarding avian decreases, all of us must admit to some doubt. However well we may know our own area, we must confess that we cannot be sure what is happening elsewhere. The only hope of being certain *before* it is too late is to undertake a systematic series of counts. There are many pitfalls in such a program, but if variables are kept under control as much as possible, the key to obtaining a significant set of data is to accumulate large amounts. If a given route is covered frequently, under comparable conditions, some trends will probably become apparent after a few years. Certainly what happens along any one route is of doubtful over-all significance for an entire species, but given enough routes systematically covered, a true picture of declining or increasing abundance for some species should emerge. Although observers may contribute to this type of project by working out their own methods, a commendable start has already been made on a nation-wide scale several years ago. This project, of course, is the Breeding Bird Survey. For the uninformed, details of this survey may be obtained from Mr. Danny Bystrak, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland 20810.

Other organized counts, such as the Christmas Bird Count, may provide useful information over the years, as they surely have the advantage of representing large amounts of data in a single day. The extent to which they may be relied upon, however, is subject to much debate. The truth is that their reliability varies greatly from case to case. Those adhering most strictly to the rules; reporting time, distance traveled, and numbers of birds most conscientiously; putting emphasis on accurate reporting rather than list-building — these are the counts that may be used with confidence (IF we know which ones they are). But when many zealous bird watchers are released within one 15-mile circle, some intent chiefly on seeing "good" birds, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to control what happens. Unfortunately, it is often the very counts that provide the smallest amounts of data (hours or miles) that are the most reliable, as they represent the work of a single competent observer (or group) covering precisely the same route each year.

2. *Substantiation of Unusual Records.* Proving that a given rarity has actually occurred in Florida does not have the degree of importance, practically or ultimately, as proving that Ospreys, for example, actually are decreasing. However, in view of the emphasis given to faunal lists, especially those of states, it must be admitted that proving such an occurrence is far more important than claiming it. Most state lists recognize an official list of birds whose occurrence has been substantiated, plus a Hypothetical List of those claimed, but not proven, to have occurred. It is ironic that, as the number of observers increases, the Hypothetical List should *increase* rather than decrease. There are two generally accepted ways of proving an occurrence—by collecting and preserving the specimen or by recognizably photographing it. Surely it is unreasonable to expect that every species accredited to a state list be supported by a specimen. There are some species that may not legally be collected, some places where they may not or should not be collected, many observers who do not have collecting permits, and perhaps other reasons for not collecting. In such cases, every effort should be made to secure incontrovertible photographic evidence to support the record. However, it is not true that photographing the bird is the better method in all cases. In this state and others, some photographs have failed to convince experts of the accuracy of the observation—indeed some have proven the identification to be inaccurate. Could a photographer expect a picture of a fall Yellow-bellied Flycatcher to show that it was not, in fact, a yellow-bellied Acadian Flycatcher? On the other hand, for distinctive species, photography with the proper equipment may document records of large birds too wary to be collected.

3. *Publication of data.* It is obvious that one could follow the above suggestions and still make no contribution unless the results were made available to others; or that others with less valuable information could make greater contributions by putting them on record. If one is unaccustomed to writing for a scientific journal, suggestions on the inside back cover of this one provide a guide to the style expected by most editors. The primary rule is to relate the important facts without using unnecessary words. A contributor should not be discouraged if changes are suggested in his manuscript; very few ever escape that fate. These changes nearly always shorten the article, thus saving space for other notes. They also make the report easier to understand, thus are helpful to the author, the reader, and the journal. In general, one should simply accept them and be thankful that his contribution can be passed along to others. The section devoted to field notes provides an outlet for all observers who have become proficient in identifying birds, even if many will never make detailed studies of them.

4. *Cooperation with others who contribute.* Even those who do not contribute to ornithology in any of the ways listed above may do so by helping others in various ways. Every member of the Florida Ornithological Society does so by the payment of dues, but there are many other ways, most of them obvious, in which one can aid research and the publication of its results. The extent to which our membership does so will largely determine the success of this journal.