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Books

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Confession of an Avian Researcher. Paul A. Stewart. 1989. Center for Promotion of Uninhibited Ornithological Research, Virgilina, VA. 53 pp. Available from: Center for Promotion of Uninhibited Ornithological Research, P.O. Box 335, Virgilina, VA. 24598. Single copies free while supplies last.

This unusual little booklet lacks a clear focus, provides no major insights, and falls short of sound scientific thinking and synthesis. Instead, it provides a rambling collection of personal opinions on the process of publication in ornithology (Foreword and Chapters 1 and 3), and a diffuse array of uncritically analyzed banding data on selected species collected at a few banding stations and through the Banding Office (Chapters 3 to 7). Sponsorship of the booklet by the Center for Promotion of Uninhibited Ornithological Research should immediately alert the reader to the fact that this publication falls outside the mainstream of ornithological literature. The booklet may have interest as a curio, but it contains little of value for the serious ornithologist.

The author is a committed bird bander but, unfortunately, one with an apparently limited understanding of what constitutes good science. Clearly, he has spent considerable time and effort in collecting data in the hope of using them to enhance the understanding of population dynamics and migration. These are worthy and commendable goals. But on their own, data have little value. It is how the data are used to answer specific questions, or test explicit hypotheses, that provides them with meaning. To this end, the use of, for example, the controlled experiment, in which the number of variables is limited, and statistical tests as tools to interpret the data in a robust fashion, have become normal practice. Without them, the approach to science becomes soft and lacks rigour. Stewart, unfortunately, does not appear to appreciate these realities.

Instead of acknowledging his limitations and seeking the assistance of those who could help him to remedy them, he appears determined to soldier on independently. This is unfortunate, because with a little help and guidance his diligence and enthu-

siasm could have been harnessed to produce much more useful data than appear in the booklet. It is easy to sense the author's frustration over not being able to publish his work in the primary literature. But most of us, at one time or another, have experienced the rejection of a manuscript. Although the sense of disappointment is always there, the rejected manuscript is usually revised in the light of the referees' criticisms and ultimately results in the appearance of a strengthened piece of work. The key is to accept criticism in the constructive spirit in which it is usually offered. Stewart seems unable to accept and benefit from such criticism.

But the booklet does have some value. For me, it points out how poorly we North American ornithologists interact with each other. Is it not time that we learned from the European experience? The model of the British Trust for Ornithology comes to mind. Although it may not be the perfect model, I am amazed at how it combines the expertise of the "professional" ornithologist with the unbounded enthusiasm of the skilled "amateur." As a result, its scientific output is sound, its data base vast, and the relationships appear truly symbiotic.

If a like spirit prevailed in North America, I sense that we could tap into a vast, underutilized resource. In so doing, we would not only advance the cause of ornithology, but also assist individuals, such as Stewart, to make their contributions in a scientifically sound and satisfying manner. The wasteful bitterness that taints Stewart's writing could be avoided and his talents receive the fulfillment they deserve.

The publication of this booklet may not have achieved the ends that its author wished; but if it has done nothing more than make us think about science as a process, and the relationships between those who practice it, then it has made its contribution.

Alex L. A. Middleton