THE SIGHT RECORD

By ALEXANDER SPRUNT, JR.

(This recent article by Mr. Sprunt, who will speak to us at the coming con-
vention in Kenosha, is always timely in that it is an excellent reminder to all
of us of the extreme care necessary in recording field observations.—Bernard
Kaiman)

There is probably no one phase of ornithological endeavor so well
deserving the term "bone of contention" as does the matter of the sight
record. Much has been written about it, but little decided. There was
a time, not many years ago, when this type of observation was completely
ignored, to say nothing of being frowned upon. Such attitude has had
to undergo a change.

The tremendous increase in the number of bird observers over the
country, the existence of excellent field guides, and wider use of the
binocular and the definite ability of many amateurs, has raised the
reputation of the sight record to something of considerable value. At the
same time, some of the former objections to it still exist and must be
considered.

There are two extremes existent. One is the opinion that it is safer
to reject all sight records flatly, not that the veracity of the observer is
questioned, but simply because of the policy long followed by certain in-
dividuals and institutions, in never accepting a record until it is backed
by an actual specimen. This might be termed the "museum policy". It
can be readily understood by anyone who was ever connected with
museum work! It probably never can be by anyone not so connected.
This method undoubtedly curtails complete knowledge of the birds of
a locality because some of the rejected records are, without doubt, accu-
rate. It is therefore, extreme and not to be desired.

The other extreme is to accept any sight record offered without
question. This has so often resulted in embarrassment and mistake, that
it has much to condemn it. Therefore, some sort of happy medium is
the policy desired, which at once produces the question—what is the
happy medium? Therein lies all argument, often acrimonious, and re-
grettable. The writer fully realizes that, in dealing with the subject at
all, he is playing with dynamite, but someone has to come into contact
with explosives, and there are certain facts about this type of them
which all of us would do well to bear in mind.

The one great factor in connection with the sight record is the
human equation. How good is the observer who submits it? How much
experience has he, or she, had? How well do they know the species re-
ported? How prone are they to jump to conclusions, rather than to
carefully weigh all evidence? How is one to judge these things without
personally knowing the observer? These are serious questions which
the observer does not, by any means, always consider.

The writer feels fully assured that there are very few observers who
deliberately make erroneous reports. There are always some, of course,
who desire the limelight, who like to see their names in print connected
with the unusual, who are anxious to create an impression. Human
nature, being what it is, this is inevitable. However, the vast majority
of sight records are given in the fullest sincerity. They may be erroneous, but not intentionally so. The observer thinks that he, or she, is correct. How can a foundation of solid accuracy be obtained? Only by a careful study of already undoubted published material; wide reading; examination of specimens either mounted, or study skin, and a complete knowledge of the literature regarding the locality involved. How many amateur observers fulfill these requirements? Regrettably, one concludes, very few!

Optical illusions are not infrequent in field work. They must be watched for and considered. The quality of light is a tremendous factor in the shape, color and size of a bird. Experienced observers have been sadly misled by it at times. Fog, shadow, cloud and sunlight, all have varying effects in the field. Birds appear very large at times, more so than they actually are. Again, they may seem smaller. Colors appear at variance with actuality, with the result that certain combinations are recorded in all sincerity which do not actually exist. The observer thinks that something has been seen when actually it has not.

Rejection of some records and acceptance of others is certainly irritating to those whose observations are refused. Why, asks the rejected one, is so-and-so’s word better than mine? It is not that one’s word is better than another’s but, acceptance or rejection is usually based on what is known of the observer’s ability. But, if the observer finds himself, or herself, in a strange locality where no one knows them, what chance have they? They may well conclude that they have no reputation, one way or the other. However, in ornithology, one’s reputation is often better known than the owner suspects! Frequently it precedes one.

Bird study is still a somewhat restricted field and its adherents are enthusiasts. Do you not, yourself, know the names and reputations of some observers whom you have never met? Of course. So then, a reputation is basically essential for the acceptance of sight records. This does not mean that ornithology tends toward the theory that all men are liars until proven truthful! Far from it. It is, if one will look at that way, a business proposition. What total stranger, for instance, could enter a bank and present a check at the teller’s window and have it cashed without question? What complete stranger in any town could go to a store, make a purchase, and have it charged to account without some identification? This does not mean that either the bank or the store considers the person dishonest. But because there are dishonest people in the world, business has to be careful. It would be a wonderful thing if some sort of a credit bureau could be worked out for ornithological journals! One feels sure the editors would welcome it!

One feature which has brought the sight record into disrepute is the frequent tendency of the new observer to see the unusual. This is understandable, to a degree, for the newcomer has a reputation to make, and what better way to make it than to see something no one else has? But it can be easily overdone, and often has. The beginner should go slowly in making unusual reports. Someone of experience should be appealed to for corroboration. This does not mean that the original light need be hidden under a bushel, but the value of a witness in anything is unquestioned.
Here is a case in point. An observer, rather new to the locality, reported to the writer that an observation had been made of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. The area involved was some thousand miles out of the bird’s normal range. Though a distinctive bird, one that would be difficult to confuse with anything else, aid was sought, and gladly given. It turned out that the bird was a mockingbird which had suffered the loss of its central tail feathers! The resulting “fork” in the tail, general coloration and size had convinced the observer that a Scissor-tail had been seen—but it had not.

Even long field experience is sometimes at fault. Who has not made mistakes? But, because a mistake is made now and then is no proof of incompetency, rather it is an illustration of the fact that the best can be fooled at times! There is the matter of light referred to above. It played a remarkable trick on two friends of the writer’s, one a bird artist of national renown, the other a highly competent field observer. On a very hazy day they saw some birds in a lagoon at a distance, they both took for geese. Persistent and careful examination ultimately revealed the “geese” as pied-billed grebes! Impossible, you say . . . not at all. The light conditions were responsible, but the observers took the trouble to make sure. Many do not make sure. If either of the two had reported geese in the area they would have been believed implicitly, and yet . . . they would have been mistaken!

The writer has often been told that ivory-billed woodpeckers have been seen by this and that observer, because the white bills were noted. Not in one instance was the bird anything but a pileated. Pileated woodpeckers do not have white bills, and these reported birds did not, but . . . the way the light struck them, they looked white. Other field marks were not, apparently, looked for at all. The white bill is the poorest possible identification mark of the real ivory-bill for, having seen the bird on occasions, the writer knows just how poor this character can be.

Intolerance and a certain sense of superiority are sometimes the cause of the rejection of sight records, even from those who have already established what is considered a reputation! The writer vividly recalls reporting the observance of a willet on the coast of Maine, to an ornithological friend there. The willet does not ordinarily occur in Maine, and the friend was frankly skeptical, and said so! The next day he himself saw the bird! He was convinced then, but not before.

There have, of course, been unfortunate examples of the reverse. The publishing of the observances of one who was not known, without question, for instance. Then, when finding that the report was erroneous, a correction has to be made, but the harm has already been done. This is highly regrettable, as anything appearing in print is always hard to correct. So many do not see the correction.

An instance of this was the only (supposed) record of the caracara for North Carolina. It was published, and found its way into no less an authoritative work than Bent’s Life Histories of North American Birds but . . . it was erroneous! It was later rejected in the journal which first published it, because it ascertained the observer’s lack of ability to recognize birds, but not until four years had passed was this found out. How many readers who saw the original record, saw the correction?
Where then, must one draw the line? Only, after all, in the discretion of the editor, or those entrusted with the acceptance or refusal of records. Only after careful study of the reputation of the observer, not through any lack of confidence in integrity, but simply to make certain of no mistake. So the observer should always be careful in the first place, and this is, by no means, always the case. No one should object to any such advice.

It is always advisable to produce the specimen. However, there are times when this is impossible. It is realized that this article has settled nothing, but it might, at least, be an explanation of why some records are taken and others are not. Have a thought for the harrassed editor, or his associates, and ALWAYS be sure of what you submit. If this is done, you will keep him, and them, out of many a tough spot!

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**NATURE VERSUS THE FLOOD WATERS**

By EDNA J. GOLDSMITH

The Prairie du Chien area experienced, last spring, the worst flood in its history. It was at high stage from about April 10 to April 20, with the crest being reached on April 20. There were continual strong winds. My notes, as late as May 6, say, "Water is very slow in receding". The equally swollen Wisconsin, emptying its waters into the Mississippi here, formed a bottleneck for the latter. Heavy snows, and, particularly, heavy rains farther north produced the flood waters.

There was a tremendous immediate effect upon all wild life. Migration of birds of practically all kinds was nil. Waters were too deep for water or shore birds to find food. Shrubs which provide feed for low-feeding song birds were many feet under water. There were no weed seeds and no seed-eating birds. The song birds may have followed the higher hillsides in going up river.

Damage was done to nesting ducks. Many migrated farther north without stopping. Others lost their broods. Hooded mergansers and scaups nested in this vicinity due to the late spring. The wood ducks profited from the conditions due to their homes not being flooded, while their enemies were kept away by the waters.

The usual large numbers of American egrets which appear here by August passed us up entirely. A very few were seen up river. Larger numbers have been reported in Illinois than usual. Comparatively fewer blue herons were here.

A great deal of damage was done to fur-bearing animals—rabbits, squirrels, fox, mink, even raccoon, and, especially, muskrats. There is no muskrat trapping this winter. The rats just had no place to go. Deer were marooned on small projections of ground, often a sand-bar, until rescued, or they starved there.

Conservationists feel that there will be no great permanent loss to wild life. When conditions return to normal in the seasons to come, the wild creatures will, again, be found in their former habitats.

Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin