

MINUTES OF THE 1st CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN RARITIES COMMITTEES IN TEXEL, the NETHERLANDS

(Oct 12-20 1991)

Background and technical aspects of work of rarities committees.

The following account was originally written by Peter H Barthel and was discussed, modified and completed by the participants of the first meeting of European and American rarities committees (from Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA) on Texei, Noordholland, the Netherlands, in October 1991. The final version was written by PHB, Pieter Bison and Claudia Wilds, and was agreed upon by all participants of the Texel meeting.

Rationale

An unusual bird sight in a given area does not necessarily constitute a scientifically insignificant event. Such cases can be of interest in the context of migration, orientation behaviour and range extension, and as consequences of weather patterns. They have to be carefully documented to be useful in contributing to answer scientific questions.

There are numerous examples of rare bird records which, according to the knowledge of that time, were considered insignificant deviations from the norm but which later proved to be the signs of a newly recognized phenomenon. Only long-term documentation at a high standard can reveal such patterns which may be of special interest in the light of rapid environmental changes.

The recent enormous rise in bird(watch)ing activity and improvement in field identification have not only led to a steep increase in rare bird reports but also facilitate their documentation. The sighting of a rare bird is only a first step in establishing a record: evidence must be submitted to an independent committee. Such rarities committees, now well established in many countries worldwide, provide a valuable service to the field observers and the scientific community alike by scrutinizing records, publishing them in annual reports and putting on (generally accessible) file all information pertaining to observations of rare birds.

In many older and still too many contemporary publications, such observations or claims have not been checked by a competent committee and lack any form of publicly available documentation. These cases are scientifically worthless and should no longer burden the ornithological literature.

Rarities committees are not made mainly to verify claims of twitchers or to produce long country lists. The occurrence of rarities is a biological phenomenon to be studied like any other part of ornithology. Thus, it has to be treated in the same way: from a scientific point of view. The listing of records is just the beginning but probably the part birders enjoy most. The neglected and most important part is to use this knowledge in further research. If one looks at rarities in this way, it becomes evident that a scientist can work only with proven or substantiated records, not with claims or unverified reports. One recklessly accepted report may distort a whole pattern of occurrence.

To reveal such patterns, especially in very rarely occurring species, the analysis of records from vast areas is essential. Therefore, close co-operation among European rarities committees is necessary. Every rarities committee (or better, every scientist working in the field of ornithology) in Europe must be able to trust the decisions of any other rarities committee. This objective is best served by a standardized method for checking reports and reaching clear decisions. This method should be used in every European country (or even worldwide).

To state it more bluntly, ornithology is a science and not a playground for listers. Rarities committees are responsible for the decisions that they publish.

Guidelines

A comparison of the work of several European rarities committees has been made. Most of them, mainly in northern and central Europe, work in the same and obviously successful way. Most of the following guidelines are derived from their methods.

1. A rarities committee should work independently. In particular, decisions on records should not be influenced by societies or sponsoring organisations.
2. A rarities committee should consist of at least five members, independently of the size of the country. It does not seem to be necessary or even useful to have more than 10 members. Periodic rotation of all members is advisable. Members should be elected by the committee. Every member should have qualifications that contribute to the work of the committee, eg, extensive field experience, knowledge of the current literature, skills in ringing or in examining museum skins and knowledge of the current birding scene.
3. Decisions should be reached unanimously or nearly so. A record should not be accepted with more than one negative vote. There should be a provision to allow reconsideration of any record.
4. There are different ways to circulate reports but two seem preferable. Every member receives his/her own copy of the documentation and comes to an independent decision which he/she submits to the secretary. If the opinions diverge, a report will be sent out again (with the arguments for and against it) until it is accepted (or rejected with at least two votes) in the third circulation. The second way is that one member gives a first statement, then sends the whole thing to the next member who agrees or disagrees, writes his/her opinion under the first statement - and so on. If, in the end, there are conflicting opinions, the file will circulate again. Difficult cases can be discussed in meetings of the full committee.
5. Whenever possible, the first (or preferably the first five) records should be proved by photographs, video films or tape recordings. In some cases, descriptions by highly qualified observers might suffice.
6. Reports of rarities committees should be published every year. All the relevant information of a record should be given when available (species, date, place, province, number of individuals, age, sex, names of responsible observers, and the kinds of documentation: photographs, video films or tape recordings). It should also be stated when a bird has been caught or found dead. In the latter case, the locality of the specimen and the collection number must be given. A list of species that are considered by the committee should be published periodically and be available upon

request. A summary in English, French or German should be included in reports in other languages. Every rarities committee should send its annual reports to every other committee in Europe.

7. The first (or preferably the first five) records should always be published in detail in a national (not regional) journal, including the full description and photographs (even if of poor quality), with a summary in English, French or German. The full documentation of every record should be kept on permanent file and made publicly accessible.
8. Every rarities committee should check the old exceptional records. In particular, reports of difficult species for which new identification criteria have been established should be reconsidered.
9. Records of probable, certain or likely escapes of Holarctic species (or others with a remote vagrancy potential) should be treated like genuine vagrants. Details of their occurrence should be given in an appendix to the annual report of the committee. Otherwise, possibly useful information (eg, to reconsider them later or to establish a pattern of occurrence revealing genuine vagrancy) might get lost.
10. Every rarities committee should take care that reports that are not accepted by the committee are not referred to in the literature.
11. If a committee has difficulties in judging a report with respect to identity or origin, it should ask specialists for help instead of reaching an unsatisfactory decision.
12. The participants agreed that efforts should be undertaken to establish a European list committee as well as a European rarities committee. Details should be discussed during the next meeting. They also agreed that European meetings should be held about every second year.

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