

The challenges of assessing records of rare birds

The proportion of records accepted by BBRC appears to be on the increase. This rate was relatively stable for many years, at about 80%, but in the last two years it has increased, with the acceptance rate in 2012 falling just a whisker short of 90%.

What could be the reasons for this increase? The rapid development of digital technology is undoubtedly a key factor, combined with similar improvements in communications technology. The concept of being able to broadcast the news of a rare bird to a wide audience as soon as it is found would have been staggering to BBRC members little more than 25 years ago. In those days, it would have been a matter of luck if the bird had lingered long enough for one of a small band of bird photographers to capture an identifiable image of it. The existence of those images would have been announced by the lucky photographer to those arriving to see the bird, via an impromptu car-boot sale of prints featuring their best recent rare-bird images. In the days before birding magazines became awash with photographs, never mind the internet, this was the only way to build a personal reference library of such images. Nowadays, many (most?) observers carry a camera of some description, to be used for taking either stills or videos through a telescope or with a telephoto lens. Images of the latest rarity are now commonly available as the bird is found or – at least – shortly after someone else has broadcast the news of a find. Many birders also carry some form of recording device, or at least can call upon their mobile phone to capture the song or calls of a potential vagrant.

This level of evidence has undoubtedly enabled a higher proportion of records to be ‘proved’ by the finders or by subsequent observers. A comparison between the records for 1992 and 2012 shows an increase from 9% to 63% for the percentage that were submitted to BBRC with supporting photographic evidence, those with sound recordings increasing from 0% to 3% during the same period. The proportion of single-observer claims has remained relatively static,

at about 13% over the past two decades, suggesting that improvements in communication have not reduced the likelihood of an observer being the only person to enjoy a rarity. However, the proportion of *photographed* single-observer rarities increased from less than 1% to nearly 60%. Even so, the 40% of single-observer records in this report that were accepted despite a lack of photographic evidence shows that such records are not treated as unacceptable by definition, despite concerns that this may be the case.

This analysis suggests that there is no evidence of an increasing reticence by lone observers of rarities that are not photographed or sound-recorded to submit their observations, as is sometimes claimed. There are, of course, still plenty of birding situations more likely to generate such records. It remains a major challenge to secure digital evidence of birds seen on seawatches or from boats, while a brief encounter with a skulking passerine or fly-over raptor are similarly problematic. Some observers cover remote islands or sites with restricted access, which makes it less feasible for other observers to share their finds. All these circumstances have traditionally provided the Committee with its most challenging assessments and this remains true. This is where the semantics of the terminology we deploy becomes important. We do not reject records, we find them not proven. The conscious decision to use this terminology consistently was introduced by Nigel Hudson when he took over the Secretarial role. It allows us to reinforce that not accepting a record does *not* mean that we necessarily believe that the observer made a mistake. It simply means that we consider the evidence obtained was insufficient for the Committee to accept the record.

This provides a frustration to some of the most talented rarity finders in the UK. There is no doubt that there is a small minority of observers who possess phenomenal abilities to identify rare birds in the briefest of circumstances. This phenomenon was described by the psychologist Malcolm Gladwell, in his 2005 book *Blink: the power of thinking without*

thinking as ‘thin-slicing’. He described the ability of top-level sportsmen to achieve the ‘ideal response’ in their particular sport without necessarily being able to articulate or consciously rationalise how they did it. He recognised that the same talent is common to the sharpest birders. He used the well-known North American observer David Sibley to illustrate his point, describing how Sibley had identified the first Ruff *Calidris pugnax* for his state in flight and knew instantly what the species was, despite never having seen it before. There are observers in the UK who can identify Blyth’s Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus dumetorum* in flight, but does that mean we should accept such records, without any further supporting evidence, on reputation alone?

The main problem is that we are all capable of making mistakes. Top birders are not only capable of identifying rare birds on the briefest of views, they will also admit that they are sometimes tricked by a brief view. This is something that has been touched on many times, perhaps most amusingly by Meiklejohn in 1950, when he described the Bare-fronted Hoodwink *Dissimulatrix spuria*, but certainly before and since. The very best birders are those who are able to recognise that they make errors but then learn from them. With this comes the ability to recognise when to let a record go. All birders will have tales of ‘the one that got away’ and the fine line between an accepted and a not-proven decision often relates to where this line is drawn. In some cases, Committee members are unanimous that they have reached the right decision, but in others there is disagreement between the voting members about where that threshold lies. This emphasises the fact that observers should not consider a not-proven decision a reflection on their own judgement or abilities. Our voting constitution determines that a minority of members can ensure that a record is deemed not proven, although this situation is extremely rare in practice. Less than 5% of not-proven records were determined on a minority decision in 2011. In that same year the number of split votes that were determined not proven (i.e. a majority in favour of

this outcome, but not a unanimous decision) was 42%, while there were 53% unanimous not-proven decisions. Only 30% of the not-proven records involved single-observers and 25% *were* photographed. So, we find that the majority of single-observer records *do* get accepted, but also that a photo does not necessarily guarantee acceptance. Record assessment requires a judgement based on a range of factors and ultimately decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis on the evidence presented.

When any assessment results in a split vote, particularly those with a narrow majority or where voting members have indicated that there is some uncertainty in their decision, there is always a process of review before we conclude. Any record that has one or two not-proven votes is recirculated around the full Committee before a final decision is reached (see our Constitution for this and more about our voting procedures at www.bbrc.org.uk/about/constitution). This process avoids the opportunity for any individual to have an unfair influence on a record’s fate, another accusation that has been occasionally levelled at BBRC in the past.

We plan to publish some of the close calls in *BB* and on the BBRC website in the coming months, to help birders to understand the assessment process (and to enable feedback and dialogue). We welcome the support of the observers involved and their willingness to allow their records to be used for this purpose. Ultimately, there is often no absolute right or wrong decision in many cases of record assessment, and an outcome should certainly not be taken as a reflection on the character of the observer. We hope that this will encourage observers not to take offence if ‘not proven’ is the outcome from one of their own observations and to continue to engage with us and in the process of rarity assessment in the future. The BBRC archive hosts a number of not-proven records from current and previous members of the Committee, including me. It is all part of the learning process that is birding!

Adam Rowlands on behalf of BBRC

What do you think? Join the debate at www.britishbirds.co.uk/category/editorials

News and comment

Compiled by Adrian Pitches

Opinions expressed in this feature are not necessarily those of *British Birds*

RSPB says 'Frack off'

The RSPB has issued its first objection to fracking proposals by Cuadrilla in Lancashire over concerns that the controversial drilling for shale gas will harm wildlife and the climate. The drilling site at Singleton, near Blackpool, is close to the Ribble Estuary, which has internationally important wintering populations of Pink-footed Geese *Anser brachyrhynchus* and Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus*.

The RSPB is also officially objecting to the contentious plans to explore for oil and gas at Balcombe in Sussex on the grounds that no Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out, and because increasing oil and gas use will scupper our chances of meeting climate targets.

Harry Huyton, RSPB Head of Climate and Energy Policy, said: 'Balcombe has hit the headlines as the battleground in the debate over fracking. The public there are rightly concerned about the impact this new technology will have on their countryside. These are not just nimbys worried about house prices – there is a very real public disquiet about fracking. We have looked closely at the rules in place to police drilling for shale gas and oil, and they are simply not robust enough to ensure that our water, our landscapes and our wildlife are safe.'

'Cuadrilla boss and former energy secretary Lord Howell claims that when he made his much

publicised howler about fracking in the "desolate North East" he actually meant the North West. There may not be as many local residents as in Sussex, but this area is protected by European law because it is so valuable for wildlife and Cuadrilla has done nothing to investigate what damage their activities could do to it.'

Mr Huyton added: 'Government figures show that in the north of England there is potential for 5,000 fracking sites and a total of up to 100,000 wells. The idea that these will not have an impact on the countryside is very difficult to believe.'

Meanwhile, RSPB HQ has embraced renewable energy and applied for planning permission to erect a wind turbine at The Lodge in Bedfordshire. If the plans are approved, then the turbine (measuring 100 m at its highest point) is predicted to produce the equivalent of two-thirds of the RSPB's total UK electricity needs.

Martin Harper, Conservation Director of the RSPB, said: 'A wind turbine at our UK headquarters is the single biggest step we can take to reduce our carbon emissions. We know that wind turbines in the wrong place can damage wildlife, and we have objected to proposals up and down the country that we believe would harm species. However, all the evidence shows that when they are sited carefully, wind turbines can produce clean, green energy without harming birds and other species.'

Sea Eagles and Cranes breed in eastern Scotland

For the first time in almost two centuries White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla* have bred in the east of mainland Scotland. A pair released in 2009 as part of the reintroduction project using birds from Norway has raised one chick in a woodland nest in Fife.

During 2007–12, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland reintroduced a total of 85 young White-tailed Eagles to Scotland's east coast. This population complements the reintroduction of White-tailed Eagles to western Scotland from 1975, also using chicks from Norway.

And for the first time since the Middle Ages, Common Cranes *Grus grus* have bred in Scotland. These stately birds have successfully raised a single chick in both 2012 and 2013 in North-east Scot-

land, the first confirmed successful nesting north of the border for hundreds of years.

Historical records and place-names indicate that Cranes were once well established in Scotland but died out centuries ago, primarily due to hunting and their popularity as a dish at medieval banquets. Habitat loss and a slow reproductive cycle probably hastened their disappearance.

Stuart Housden, Director of RSPB Scotland, said: 'We are stunned and delighted to see that Cranes have bred successfully in Scotland. These charming, elegant birds have a strong place in our myths and history and are a delight to see, particularly during the breeding season with their "dancing" displays. They undertake regular migrations and small numbers have turned up on the east coast of Scotland in recent years, raising hopes