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Editorial After Hastings

THE ANALYSIS OF the Hastings Rarities in the August number of *British Birds*, and the publication of the authors' findings and recommendations aroused so much interest that our readers may wish to know some of the things which have happened or come to light since then.

First and foremost, the general conclusions appear to have been wholeheartedly accepted. Many messages and letters of appreciation have been received, from the President of the British Ornithologists' Union downwards. Indeed, so far we have not heard from any ornithologist who is prepared to argue that the Hastings records as a whole can now be regarded as authentic. Several letters on the subject appear on pages 453-459 of this issue.

Such a ready recognition of the realities gives encouraging evidence of the high degree of fair-mindedness, teamwork and united leadership which British ornithology now enjoys. It should perhaps be added here that, before publication, we did of course consult with the Records Committee of the British Ornithologists' Union, in accordance with our established practice whenever the British List is liable to be affected, and all members of that committee agreed with the recommendations in so far as these came within their terms of reference.

The invitation for a case to be prepared for the re-establishment of any individual records considered to be good has received little response so far. Details of about forty records have been submitted and will be re-assessed in due course.

A few readers have regretted the publicity which the report received, and this is something that warrants elaboration. It has even been suggested by one correspondent that the record should have been

quietly set straight "in the process of revising the *B.O.U. Check-List*". But such hole-and-corner methods for dealing with long accepted records would have ensured the worst of all worlds, with incredulity and dissension among ornithologists, demands for the facts, and eventual publication in a highly charged atmosphere. The only alternative to publication was to condone a mass of records we regarded as false.

Given publication, then, it was obvious, in view of the ever-widening interest in ornithological matters and the nature of the report itself, that the exposure would inevitably attract newspaper attention. We felt that to hold a press conference on the eve of publication would give those concerned an opportunity of drawing the attention of responsible journalists to the serious scientific nature of the report and to eliminate many misunderstandings which might otherwise have arisen. This decision was more than justified as it was thus possible to clear up a number of points and to stress the report's concern with the ornithological, rather than the personal, aspects. The result was a balanced, good-humoured and reasonably accurate presentation to the public, and the episode would seem to have enhanced, rather than reduced, the regard in which ornithological standards are held. Apart from the many comments and features in the newspapers and on radio and television, serious reviews appeared in *The New Statesman* and *The New Scientist*.

We also felt that several other issues demanded a wider audience than the readers of *British Birds* and *The Ibis*. These included the possession, by many thousands of people, of books in which the birds affected by the disclosures are actually mentioned and which will now require amendment; the question whether a repetition of such a fraud is adequately provided against; the problem of this journal's share of the responsibility for the original acceptance of the records; and the desirability of reaching all possible sources of further information on the matter.

In the event, the extent and persistence of outside interest has amazed us, put some strain on the running of our affairs, and absolutely convinced us that we were right to give the facts fully and clearly to the press at the outset. Fortunately it is quite plain and generally recognised that such a large-scale deception could not occur now, thanks to the elaborate system of checking and verification which, although at times undoubtedly irksome, must now be seen more vividly than ever to be essential and to merit the universal support which it on the whole commands.

The publicity has brought in some further information, as nothing else could have done. For example, it may be remembered that on pages 316-317 of our analysis we referred to the likelihood of there being "undoubtedly some, perhaps many more" specimens which

were mounted and sold to collectors without any attempt to place them on record. Already a number of such cases are coming to light. In the City Museum and Art Gallery at Birmingham, for instance, there are specimens of Little Ringed Plover, Caspian Plover, Sooty Tern and Isabelline Wheatear which are all from the Hastings Area between 1902 and 1916. None of these was ever recorded anywhere in print, although the Little Ringed Plover would have been the first Kentish record (it antedates by ten years the Lydd specimen of the Indian race discussed on page 309 of the analysis) and the Isabelline Wheatear would have been the fifth British specimen. The label on the Isabelline Wheatear (which is dated a month before the beginning of the correspondence between Bristow and Witherby) states that it was examined in the flesh by W. Ruskin Butterfield; yet Butterfield did not even record it in his "Notes on the local fauna, flora, etc. for the year 1916" in *The Hastings and East Sussex Naturalist*. Another curious point was the discovery that one of the Black Larks (No. 302 in Appendix A) is represented by two different specimens with identical details; one of these is in the City Museum and Art Gallery at Birmingham and the other is in the Boyd Alexander Collection in Cranbrook School Museum. For reasons like these we are now trying to trace the present whereabouts of as many as possible of the Hastings Rarities. At the moment we know where only about two hundred of them are. We hope, therefore, that anyone with knowledge of any Hastings Area specimens of the species listed in Appendix A (whether or not they are already included there) will send particulars to I. J. Ferguson-Lees.

Positively, despite the unfortunate but understandable public emphasis on the elimination from the British List of six species (which constituted a mere 4% of the records concerned), we think that the episode has been helpful in showing the unexpected value of the wealth of present-day records as a means of tracing patterns by statistical methods, which to some extent even pierce the veil of the still unobserved. It may lead towards a more critical and thorough revision of the British List than anything which has yet been attempted, and even enable that List to claim a degree of scientific value in relation to distribution and migration studies, which many critics have hitherto justifiably refused to concede to it. Fresh thinking about the functions and the basis and limitations of the List has been stimulated, and we hope that it will not cease before something constructive has emerged from it. We would welcome any contributions, by way of correspondence for publication or otherwise, towards this end and, having put the Hastings Rarities where they belong, we hope in time to be able to enjoy an opportunity of unfolding a new and more satisfying story belonging not to the past but to the future.