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From the Rarities Committee's files

Records not accepted At the end of each annual 'Report on rare birds in Great Britain' there is a list of records not accepted. Observers, especially those who have submitted records which have appeared under this heading, occasionally express an interest in the precise meaning of the term 'not accepted'. It is readily apparent to the Committee that this term continues to be widely misconstrued.

Various interpretations of 'not accepted' have been suggested by observers, the most frequent being either that the Rarities Committee does not believe the record or that the Committee has positively identified the bird concerned as an alternative, commoner species. Both of these interpretations could correctly be applied to some records, but very rarely. The overwhelmingly commonest reason for non-acceptance is simply that reports contain insufficient detail to prove the identification, hence the avoidance of the more positive term 'rejected'. The terms 'proven' and 'non-proven' would be far more appropriate than 'accepted' and 'rejected', which are publishing-house terms for submitted manuscripts which the Committee has, for better or worse, inherited through common usage.

Sometimes, elements are absent from a description owing to a lack of diligence and attention to detail on the part of the observer. This can be rectified by a personal resolve to compile a full description in logical sequence whenever a rare bird is discovered. By definition, this will not be very often. More frequently, a description is incomplete because of factors largely or entirely beyond an observer's control: brief views, poor light, bad weather, long viewing distance, impeded views owing to the bird's skulking nature, or any combination of these. Such restrictions on a description should be mentioned in the report. Though the resulting gaps are testimony to an observer's honesty, their effect may still be sufficient to prevent the acceptance of the record. It is better, however, to leave such gaps, with due explanation, than to gloss over them by deceit.

Conversely, and much more rarely, there is an increasing number of claims being submitted by birdwatchers who are quite obviously falsifying or embellishing their accounts by means of reference to the literature, from knowledge of the species gained from others, or through personal experience abroad. A few such claims apparently come from observers who, for reasons best known to themselves, engage in intentional fraud. By no means all of these observers are over-keen youngsters anxious to gain kudos. Far more embellished claims, however, are attributable to self-delusion or over-zealousness, afflictions that are not confined to novices or to any one age-group. An extremely rare but dangerous extension of self-delusion is mass hallucination, when a large

number of observers is swept along on a tide of infectious enthusiasm and agrees, quite incorrectly, the identification of the bird in question (some may have had doubts, but have hesitated to contradict their peers).

For each plumage stage of each species, there are minimum requirements for a written description to be acceptable. Essentially, the documentation must be sufficient to eliminate all alternative species and to satisfy the Committee that the evidence would also convince a reviewing body in the future. An observer's high reputation is obviously an important element in the assessment process, but even the best observers are expected to provide cast-iron written evidence. No record is accepted on an observer's reputation alone. Without adequate, convincing documentation, a record has to be placed in the annual list of records not accepted.

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