

The New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee

by Robert A. Quinn

Why do we need a Rare Birds Committee? The Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH) is currently the only comprehensive source of information on bird sightings in the state. Sightings are collected and published through *New Hampshire Bird Records (NHBR)* and used for many research projects.

To have a credible publication and an accurate database of bird sightings, quality control is essential. Unusual sightings that become a permanent part of the ornithological history of New Hampshire must be able to stand up to future review by people who may no longer know the observers of the day or other pertinent events which were taking place.

Most states have rare bird committees that review unusual sightings, both past and present. After decades of individual *NHBR* editors making decisions on unusual bird reports, the four current *NHBR* editors began the process of forming a New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee in early 1995.

What does the committee do? The New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee (NHRBC) is an independent Technical Advisory Committee to *NHBR*. It reviews unusual sightings in an effort to maintain accuracy and scientific integrity for both *NHBR* and the historical database of bird sightings maintained by ASNH.

The purpose of the NHRBC is to:

- review the reports of unusual birds and accept or reject those records based upon the adequacy of the documentation.
- inform the observer of the results of the evaluation of his or her record and publish those results in *NHBR*.
- coordinate this review process with the publication of *NHBR*.
- improve the quality of documentation by educating the birding community about what requires documentation and how it should be documented.

The bylaws and guidelines of Texas, Maryland, and Massachusetts were used in designing the rules for the NHRBC. However, they were modified to fit New Hampshire's needs (e.g., one New Hampshire criterion is to keep up with each season rather than vote on an entire year's records at one time). The NHRBC bylaws are in their final draft.

The NHRBC is a group of volunteers with seven voting members, including the four *NHBR* season editors plus three at-large members: Dennis Abbott, Al Delorey (*NHBR* winter editor), Pete Hunt (*NHBR* spring editor), Steve Mirick (*NHBR* fall editor), Bob Quinn (*NHBR* summer editor), Andrea Robbins (former *NHBR* winter editor), and George Robbins.

The NHRBC is an independent body not affiliated with ASNH. This independence helps foster impartiality and maintain scientific credibility and standards in the review of sightings. However, there is an obvious informal association with ASNH because of the close work with *NHBR*.

What happens when we receive an unusual sighting? In understanding the workings of the committee it is important to be aware of the steps that your individual rare bird report goes through. All bird sightings go first to the Managing Editor of *NHBR*, Becky Suomala at ASNH. Based on criteria established by the NHRBC, documentation is requested for unusual sightings, often in consultation with the particular *NHBR* season editor.

All unusual bird documentation reports go to the season editor, who decides which reports go to the NHRBC. The editor, as a member of the NHRBC, has the flexibility to make a decision on sightings of more common species (as determined by the NHRBC) and those which do not have adequate descriptive details of the bird. A full list of all documented sightings goes to the NHRBC for review. All records that are sent to the NHRBC are circulated to each member, who makes an initial decision independently of the other members. All members then meet and vote as a group on each record.

A record must have a 7-0 or 6-1 vote to be accepted by the committee. This strict voting procedure ensures there is little or no question about what is accepted as a bona fide record. If a record gets two or more dissenting votes, there is a group discussion and then a second or even a third round of voting. If there are still two or more dissenting votes, the record is classified as "not accepted." All sightings are assigned a unique number and may be re-visited if other evidence appears.

The accepted records are included in the *NHBR* issue for the appropriate season. A summary of all records from the calendar year that were reviewed by the NHRBC appears in the Winter Season issue of *NHBR*, with appropriate explanations.

There are more stringent criteria for first state records as stated in the NHRBC bylaws. To accept a first state record, one of the following criteria must be met in addition to a unanimous vote by the committee:

- separate documentation from at least three observers
- a specimen
- a photograph or video recording
- a voice recording

It is worth noting several points about this procedure. Because of the strict voting guidelines, there are probably some legitimate records that do not get accepted (including some reports from committee members). **Votes are based upon the evidence provided by the reporter.** The observer's familiarity with the species, habitat, behavior, viewing conditions and optics used, weather, and the time of year are also considered. Personalities are not involved. The NHRBC was designed to be an independent body for this very reason—so that political pressure could not be brought to bear that would influence the validity of the state's bird records.

Adequate documentation is the key to whether a report is accepted. In the next issue of *NHBR*, there will be an article discussing how to provide good documentation and outlining which sightings require documentation.

The NHRBC is still in its formative stages and welcomes your thoughts and questions. Feel free to contact me if you would like more information:

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