

Birdshot: Pixels and Lead

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

“Whatcha seein’?” The universal greeting of birders; but this early morning in Madera Canyon, my formulaic question drew an unexpected answer. Never mind what the bird was; what was interesting was the conversation that ensued. Our interlocutor informed us that he would not be reporting his putative rarity. You see, he’d had dealings with records committees before, and each time his description had been rejected “because the bird wasn’t documented.” I’m not good at hiding puzzlement, and my bemused look drew a clarification: “You know, documented, *photographed*.”

Birders (and ornithologists, too, for that matter) spent the first decades of the 20th century fighting for the value of the sight record, arguing that verbal documentation by a careful observer could, for most species, be as credible as a specimen. And for 70 years, from, say, 1934 to, say, 2004, it was true: thorough, precise descriptions of rarities were treated with seriousness by birders and records committees alike, sometimes accepted, sometimes rejected, but in any event considered a reasonable way to document an unusual bird.

That has changed, and birding today runs the risk of becoming so heavily technologized that we abandon the artifact our hobby was founded upon nearly 100 years ago: the well-described sight record. The miracles of digital cameras and easily portable recording equipment have made it possible to secure “tangible,” “objective”—choose your adjective—documentation of rarities that just a decade ago would have been captured only in the careful observer’s notes. This is a fine thing, of course, and I am glad that so many birders submit

photographic support for their unusual reports. But I am not glad at all that documentation of an exclusively audiovisual sort is pushing verbal description aside, returning us surely and not so slowly to the same place we were in the early 20th century. Just replace “shotgun” with “digital camera.”

The triumph of the pixel over the pen is clearest in the controversy over the reports of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas in 2004 and 2005. The debate about those detections has focused almost exclusively on a few famous seconds of video showing a black-and-white something flying away from a canoe. Meanwhile, there has been precious little attention paid to the sight records made by normally credible observers: they have been neither rigorously criticized nor held up as evidence of the bird’s survival, and all eyes have turned instead unto a couple of frames of inscrutable digital video.

A spectacular image may well be worth a thousand, but sometimes it takes more words than that to tell the whole story. Let’s continue to photograph and record our birds, ordinary and rare, but let’s also step away from the computer monitor and remember, at least occasionally, to share our excitement and our experiences in words.

RBA Update: Wisconsin

The telephone number for the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology’s statewide RBA has changed. It is now (262) 784-4032.

Editor:

Rick Wright

Design:

Ed Rother

Production:

Bryan Patrick

Address editorial correspondence to:

Winging It

251 E. Rudasill Rd.

Tucson, AZ 85704-6024

winging@aba.org

(520) 544-7502

You can join the ABA, learn more about us and our programs, and access a wide range of birding links on our website:

<www.americanbirding.org>

Copyright © 2006 by the American Birding Association, Inc. All rights reserved. The opinions expressed by authors do not necessarily represent the views of this publication or of the ABA.

Winging It (ISSN #1042-511X) (USPS 003-289) is published bimonthly by the American Birding Association, Inc., 4945 N. 30th Street, Ste 200., Colorado Springs, CO 80919. Periodicals postage paid at Lebanon Junction, KY, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Winging It*, 4945 N. 30th Street, Ste. 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80919. (Individual membership: \$45 per year; includes \$12 for *Winging It* and \$33 for *Birding* magazine.) Return postage guaranteed: Send undeliverable copies and POD Forms 3579 to 4945 N. 30th Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80919-3151. For Canadian returns mail to WDS, Station A, P. O. Box 54, Windsor ON N9A 6J5. GST Registration No. R135943454. Canadian Publications Agreement No. 40033104.

- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
- The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.
- The ABA’s education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
- ABA Sales, (800) 634-7736, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.