

What to Do When You See a Rare Bird: Reporting Your Observations to the IBRC

We all enjoy watching birds for the aesthetic pleasure they give us. For many in the birding community there is also an exciting level of sport involved in the mere simple pleasures of finding, identifying, and listing. But whether it be glancing at a backyard feeder, packing binoculars during a favorite stroll through our local park or “green area,” or a more well-planned and targeted birding excursion, somewhere, sometime, we will all see that out-of-place, “What is it doing here?” bird that makes us look twice and wonder, “This is great, but now what do I do?”

Much of our understanding of bird distribution and identification, the kind of information it is so easy to take for granted, has come from observations by legions of “non-professional” birdwatchers or birders. In fact, the chances are very good that because you have the interest to read this article, you too will soon see, or have already seen, a bird that can add to our understanding of the birdlife of Idaho.

Among the goals of the Idaho Bird Records Committee is

1. assisting you in confidently providing a vital piece of the bigger puzzle we call Idaho’s birds, and
2. providing a fair and reliable standard and criteria for the acceptance and use of the individual pieces of that puzzle

Let’s get practical and deal with the realities that can sometimes be intimidating and carry a certain mystique that conveys the mistaken message “This report thing is for ‘professional birders’ only.” Let’s meet that all too often held fear and hesitation head on.

What should you do when you see that geographically and/or seasonally unusual bird?

For brevity’s sake, here are the absolutely vital actions you should take before, during, and after your encounter:

1. Have a fair knowledge of what birds are possible in the area
2. Have a working knowledge of the names of the different parts of a bird’s external anatomy
3. View the bird as long as is possible or reasonable
4. Be prepared with a small notebook ...and use it. (See the excellent article by Claudia Wilds, “*On Taking a Notebook Afield*”)
5. Don’t look at a field guide before or while taking notes
6. Take a photo, video or make an audio recording, if at all possible
7. Tell others about your find as soon as feasible
8. Refer to reference material and consult “experts”
9. Write up a “Rarity Report Form” for submission to the IBRC (Idaho Bird Records Committee)

Let's look at these nine important points in a little bit more detail.

1. Have a fair knowledge of what birds are possible in the area.

Take some non-birding time to familiarize yourself with what others have been seeing, e.g. posts on IBLE, SWIBA, or Inland-NW-Birders, reports in *North American Birds*, or the newsletter of your local Audubon Society or birding club. Work your way through a favorite field guide, paying special attention to the range and distribution maps. Know the birds that you should encounter and are possible to see in your area, before worrying about what isn't seen. Compare the maps to the range and occurrence designations in the official *Birds of Idaho Field Checklist*. And even if you are not sure if a certain species is really that unusual, *treat it as if it is*. The fact that you have not seen it before and deem it to be out-of-place is an important indicator in itself, and is reason enough to at least proceed with all but perhaps # 9 of our list. With each run through this list, you will find your bird skills and judgment sharpening appreciably.

2. Have a working knowledge of the names of the different parts of a bird's external anatomy.

It actually takes little effort to commit the scientifically correct terms for a bird's anatomy to memory. Any good field guide has a clearly labeled drawing (usually multiple studies of different types of birds in the *Introduction*). After just a few minutes a day for a week, these universally recognized terms of bird nomenclature will become second nature to use...*but only if you practice using them*. Look at pictures of birds or the common, everyday species in your yard or neighborhood, and repeat the names of the parts of their anatomy to yourself.

3. View the bird as long as is possible or reasonable.

When you encounter that "strange bird," never be satisfied with but a glance. Even if you are immediately able to identify the bird and have mentally noted its "diagnostic field marks," keep studying. This is the time to give yourself the important message, "Don't hurry. Look long and carefully. It may leave any second, never to be refound again."

This is the time to register shape, size, position, activity, vocalization, as well as the basics of plumage, companions, and surroundings. When you think that you have looked long enough, spend additional minutes, thinking about how you would describe this bird to someone if you knew it was both very similar to a common species while at the same time being the last of its kind still in existence.

4. Be prepared with a small notebook.

Make it a habit to never leave home without one, or at home have one right by the feeder viewing window. The 4x5 size is great because it fits in a normal pocket. For insurance sake, have an extra one in your car and another always in the pocket of your birding jacket or shirt. And don't forget to attach a pen or pencil to the notebook. There's nothing more frustrating than having paper but nothing with which to write or draw.

If you have not done so already, carefully read (and then reread) Claudia Wilds article referred to earlier. (Claudia rigorously practiced what she preached, and largely because of her self-trained powers of observation and note-taking, became one of the country's recognized authorities on the identification of the sometimes confusing species of terns and shorebirds in their various plumages...I personally found Claudia to be a wonderfully knowledgeable and patient teacher.)

Take the time to carefully write down exactly what you see the bird(s) to look like (don't make any changes after-the-fact), using those by now memorized and second-nature terms to describe the bird's body. Look, look again, and then after looking once more, carefully write down what you saw...if possible, looking again to double check yourself. Also, as time and the presence of the bird permits, sketch a picture. It doesn't matter if you can't draw very artistically; remember, you're not drawing to win an art contest. Label what each part and color is, again preferably while still able to intermittently view the bird subject.

5. Don't look at a field guide before or while taking notes.

Here is the biggest challenge in this whole process for most birders, especially while they are still learning the birds of an area. Field guides can be a very satisfying crutch. It is somewhat rewarding to find a picture and exclaim, maybe even aloud, "That's what I just found!" Especially when we encounter the unfamiliar or rare, the temptation is sometimes overwhelming to "look at the pictures," or even read the descriptions, to find the match for what has just been seen.

DON'T DO IT!

All too often, in our excitement, we birders spend precious time looking at paper rather than feathers. Remember, the book will always be there to consult, but the bird may not.

And even if you are sure that the bird isn't going anywhere soon, use the time that you have to thoroughly study the bird, take notes, draw a sketch, and if possible and/or available, take a picture. Only when completely finished viewing the species, with your notes and sketches done, should any field guide or other reference be consulted. Only then should you compare what you have seen with the printed standards. If you don't wait, you'll find your mind playing subtle tricks on you, filling in what you just saw in reality with what you just saw and read about in a book. Often our minds draw their own composite pictures that may not exactly match physical reality as we have seen and experienced it.

In a nutshell, here is a cardinal rule for those that are serious about becoming a more skilled and knowledgeable birder:

Leave your field guide on a shelf at home, but never be without your notebook and pencil.

6. Take a picture or make an audio recording, if at all possible.

Photos are a marvelous bonus, and although they can be extremely helpful in documenting a bird and providing material for any “after-the-fact study,” they are not necessary to put together a convincing report. Whether digital or film based, there are scores of appropriate cameras available for those wanting a more permanent record of their observations. Spend some time talking to others that regularly take photos of birds, scan a bird listserv group for photos with attached names and a contact point for the photographer, or just post the pressing question that you may have about bird photography. There will be many willing to share their expertise and insights with you.

Audio recording of bird vocalizations can also be a rewarding activity and can sometimes provide unquestionable documentation of a species presence through its song or call note patterns.

7. Tell others about your find.

There are two reasons for not keeping “your find” a secret. First, you will want others to verify what you have seen. As they too are able to study and enjoy “your bird,” they will hopefully agree with your identification. There is a satisfying sense of validation that comes from being able to lead others to a bird they very much value. And even if there is eventually some disagreement about the identity of the bird, as there sometimes is even with the finds of the most experienced of birders, there is definitely no shame in expanding the horizons of identification for others and yourself. Note that the birder who never makes an honest “mistake” is the birder who is both a liar and no longer has a pulse!

The second reason for sharing your observation with others touches the very essence of the birding community. For the most part, birding has always been, and will ever remain, a shared activity, where no one practices their hobby in isolation from others in the “fellowship.” Think about this: Would you want to hear about another birder’s “discovery” and be given the option, because you’ve been give the information in a timely manner, to decide if you wanted to go and see it too? Most likely, yes...and so will others when you are the one to find “something good.”

Who do you contact? First of all, it would be helpful to belong to a state to local web listserv group such as IBLE, SWIBA, or Inland-NW-Birders and on a regular basis actively participate in posting what you see in your birding outings (even when it isn’t “the big one” that turns out to be a first state record). When you do post your rarity, be specific as to when you saw the bird(s), where, and then provide clear directions on how to get to that location. Post your message on the Internet listserv you belong to as soon after the sighting as possible, or better yet, call someone to post for you while you’re still with the bird. If you have a cell phone available to you, call a birding friend, partner, or acquaintance, and if they’re able, let them come to see the bird while you are still present (or at least, soon thereafter). Realize that it is important to cultivate a “personal network” of birding friends and have their phone numbers readily available. Call some of them and have them call others.

8. Refer to reference material and consult experts.

Now it's finally time to read as much as possible about the identification issues involved in recognizing your bird in the field. Do an internet search on the species and look at what others have written. Look at pictures, both in books and on the net. Talk with people that are more familiar with the species in question. If you know how to get in touch with acknowledged experts (e-mail is great for this purpose), send them a note, perhaps even along with a picture, if you have one, or at least a summary of your notes. Most experienced birders will be glad to share their impressions on your documented observations.

Where do you find these "experts" and "experienced observers?" For starters, you can get a pretty good feel for someone's experience or level of expertise by just following their posts on the Internet state listservs. Or check out the members of the Idaho Bird Records Committee on <http://www.IdahoBirds.net>. It's okay to ask their opinion before sending in a report. Or finally, there is always the ID Frontiers listserv. You can browse it (and many other useful specialty postings) at <http://www.birdingonthe.net>.

9. Write up a Rarity Report Form for submission to IBRC.

Congratulations! If you have faithfully followed numbers 1-8 above, this should now be simple. You already have the notes and possible sketches. Maybe there are even some photos, a video or a sound file. You've conscientiously asked others to both verify your sighting and provide input. You've checked out all the references. And now you're ready for that discovery of yours to become part of official state avian occurrence and distribution data...for others to confidently utilize sometime in the future to better understand the birdlife of Idaho.

Send your report to the Secretary of the IBRC, preferably by e-mail, but if not possible because of supporting material or other reasons, regular mail is fine. You can get the address(s) you need at <http://www.IdahoBirds.net>. Finally, be sure you've taken a moment to go over the *Checklist for Rarity Report Forms*, making sure that you've included everything asked for.

You've done it! You have seen a great bird and made it a part of Idaho's avian data resources while becoming a much better birder in the process.

J. Harry Krueger, Secretary
Idaho Bird Records Committee