

Paul Carrier

The Importance of Dead Trees

by Paul Carrier

To many people, dead trees are useless, hazardous, ugly features of our environment. Undoubtedly, there are times when dead and dying trees need to be removed because they pose a risk to people and property. Dead trees also are often perceived as a symbol of decay and neglect, leading many property owners to quickly eliminate them from landscaped settings, regardless of whether there's a hazard. This latter point of view is shortsighted, however, as this article will attempt to explain.

Food and shelter

Everyone understands how important living trees are to wildlife and birds. After dying, however, trees continue to play an important role in the natural world, providing food and shelter for birds and many other animals and organisms. In fact, some bird species depend more on dead trees than living ones. Cavity nesters in particular tend to find more housing available in dead trees due to advanced decay and woodpecker activity. Dead trees also serve as roosting sites and provide exposed perches with good visibility of surroundings and potential prey. In North America, roughly 149 species of birds rely to some degree on dead trees, underscoring how important dead trees are to birds.

As a tree dies, decomposition begins, with insects, animals, fungi and bacteria slowly breaking down the tree's organic mass. While doing so, the dead tree continues to provide sustenance to bird and animal families for many more years. Eventually, it completes its natural cycle by returning its stored nutrients back into the soil, perhaps giving a seed the chance to initiate the growth of a new tree. In a broad sense, the dead tree is food for the forest.

The many insects and invertebrates that feed on and within dead trees provide valuable food for numerous birds. For example, the beetle family includes many species that use dead and dying wood for food and shelter. The Northern Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers live almost exclusively on larvae, eggs and adult beetles they find under the bark of dead trees. Likewise, carpenter ant colonies found in both living and dead trees are the food of choice for the Pileated Woodpecker.

Other uses dead trees contribute to birds

When a tree dies within a forest, it also forms an opening containing leafless branches that birds can see through for potential danger from predators, or to identify other birds that are intruding on their territory. These dead trees become important sentinel posts for observation. In addition, what better perch can a forest bird have than a tall dead tree to fly-catch from? The Olive-sided Flycatcher is one of many species that seem to prefer a tall dead tree to

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COA Bulletin

The Avian Records Committee of Connecticut Needs Your Rare Bird Reports

by Andrew Dasinger

(with contributions from Mark Szantyr, Secretary of the ARCC)

Many of us are thrilled at the sight of a rare bird, particularly when we are the first to discover it. Most birders subsequently are eager to spread the word on an unusual sighting, so it can be shared and confirmed by others, if possible. Such observations will ultimately make it onto rare bird alerts and into birding publications, such as the *Connecticut Warbler*. The official status of an observation, however, is based upon a review of documentation submitted to the Avian Records Committee of Connecticut (ARCC) for those species on the designated review list, or for species with no prior record of occurrence in the state. The documentation of rare bird observations is a way for all birders, no matter the level of experience, to contribute to the historical record of species in the state. It's not difficult to do – instructions and forms are readily available on the COA web site at <http://ctbirding.org/ARCC.htm>.

Despite the value of providing documentation on rare birds, the number of reports submitted for review in the last three years is surprisingly low – the committee probably has fewer than 20 at this time, and most of them are written by committee members lucky enough to see the reported birds (the last ARCC report was issued in 2002). A variety of reasons might account for the dearth of rare bird reports. Below are some of the most frequent reasons birders might fail to submit documentation of a rare bird, accompanied by some words of encouragement to overcome what are generally self-imposed barriers.

I'm the only one who saw the bird and no one will believe me!

Whether a report is accepted or not depends primarily on the quality of the documentation provided, not that you were the sole observer. There are plenty of amateur birders who have provided documentation of a rare bird sighting that was accepted, even when they were the sole observer. By carefully following the guidelines on preparing documentation, you increase the credibility of your reports.

Lot's of other birder's saw it, so someone else will submit a report!

or The responsibility (and honor) of submitting a report goes to the birder(s) who saw it first!

This situation probably happens more often than people think. A rare bird shows up, word gets out, and multiple birders in the state make the trip to see it, yet no report is submitted. Therefore, do not assume that the birder(s) who saw a bird first, or someone else you believe to be more knowledgeable than yourself, will

submit the one and only report. Even if you know that others saw the bird, submit an independent record based on your own observations. In fact, the more reports that are submitted, the better the record will be, because sometimes it is multiple reports that result in acceptance of a record when each individual report on its own is insufficient.

I never knew the bird was one of those for which documentation was requested!

The species for which documentation is sought are marked with an asterisk on the official list of Connecticut birds, accessible from the COA web site. Of course, if a species is not on the state list, the need for a report is all the more critical. What an honor it would be to provide the first accepted record for Swainson's Warbler or some other potential rarity. On the other hand, documentation is no longer requested for certain birds that, while rare, have developed a regular pattern of occurrence in the state. If in doubt, check the state list to determine the need to submit a report.

I submitted a report once before, and it wasn't accepted.

Carefully review the reasons why the report was not accepted. For each rejected report, the committee provides an explanation of what was missing or deficient. Furthermore, additional information is sought from the observer before it can ultimately be rejected. Also review why other reports were accepted or rejected in the periodic reports issued by the ARCC. More likely than not, you have developed better observation and identification skills with time, and can be better prepared for the next occasion.

I saw the bird a long time ago, but didn't know to submit anything at the time.

No "statute of limitations" applies when it comes to bird sightings. If you have a recognizable photo, field notes and/or sketches made at the time, for a bird you saw many years ago, there's no reason not to submit a report for review by the ARCC. It will be reviewed just like other reports. On the other hand, if you only have your memory to rely upon for, say, the juvenile Long-tailed Jaeger you thought you saw during a nor'easter sometime in the late 60s or early 70s, then submitting a report is probably not necessary.

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Avian Records Committee (continued)

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Is there really any value in going through the effort of documenting a vagrant that may have simply lost its way?

There are many species for which documentation is desired because they are extremely rare breeders in the state or had a historic range that included the state. Furthermore, patterns of vagrancy are ultimately important for improving our understanding of individual species distributions. The value of your addition to the historic record of birds in Connecticut is a compelling reason to submit documentation.

So far, this article has focused on convincing you why you ought to submit documentation of rare bird sightings. But exactly what evidence should be offered to substantiate a sighting?

Documentation can take a number of forms. A detailed written description of an eyewitness account is most commonly provided. A sketch made in the field shortly after a sighting, annotated with written notes, will add significantly to the quality of the documentation. You need not be an artist or illustrator – text and clear diagrams can be used to explain exactly what you saw. This can focus on key details, such as the pattern on the head or tail of a bird. Much has been written on the topic of written documentation, so it will not be repeated here. The reader can refer to the guidelines on reporting rare sightings provided in the ARCC section of the COA web site at http://ctbirding.org/rare_report.htm.

Another level of documentation is the submission of photos or tape recordings. A photograph can provide definitive documentation, although the combination of photo quality and identification difficulty of a particular species does not always make it conclusive. Tape recordings are a valuable means of documentation, particularly for nocturnal and secretive species, or for certain birds that are identifiable in the field only through vocalization. Photos and tape recordings are about the highest degree of documentation that can be expected in the majority of cases.

Additional forms of documentation are provided much less frequently. Specimens are the basis for many of our historical records, but these are rare today; examples would be a storm-driven bird that dies from exhaustion in the hands of a rehabilitator or a bird that strikes a window. Mist netting conducted by licensed banders who take measurements and photographs in the hand occasionally has been used to distinguish between species that are nearly identical in certain plumages; for example, various species of hummingbirds. Banding stations have also trapped unusual species that happened to pass through an area and otherwise would have been undetected.

One can imagine even more exotic forms of documentation, such as DNA analysis of feathers or droppings, and in fact this approach to identification has been used or contemplated in several cases. For example, a possible Slender-billed Curlew, a critically endangered species, was identified in the fall of 2004 at the Royal Society of Bird Protection's Minsmere Reserve on the Suffolk coast in England. Identification through field observation alone, however, was inconclusive. Birders then took it upon themselves to carefully watch the bird so that they could collect any droppings or molted feathers for subsequent DNA analysis. In the end, the bird proved to be a Eurasian Curlew.

To conclude this discussion, let's turn to the remarkable re-discovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the bayous of eastern Arkansas. A bird believed by many to be extinct requires very convincing documentation to be accepted by the scientific community. Ever since the last definitive U.S. sighting in 1944, sporadic eyewitness accounts have been largely dismissed,

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My Red-shoulder works great.

**Oh Yeah? -Well watch them turn
their heads when I do my Chat!**

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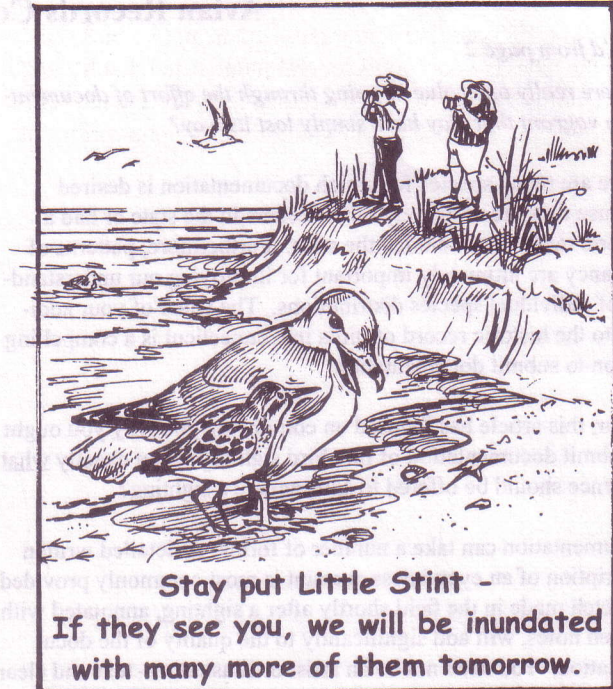
sometimes ridiculed, or remained uncorroborated. This spring, representatives of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology presented documentation of several alleged sightings in a peer-reviewed paper appearing in the highly respected journal *Science*. Soon afterwards, a group of ornithologists prepared a critical analysis claiming the evidence presented was not conclusive, which they later withdrew based on their review of some convincing tape recordings of vocalizations and characteristic double-rap sounds. Other well-known individuals in the national birding community also expressed concern with the level of documentation.

It's interesting to speculate whether any report based on one of the recent sightings would be accepted by an avian records committee. The difficulty with the Ivory-billed Woodpecker sightings is that they were all based on eyewitness testimony, with a very poor quality video being the only physical evidence. The tape recordings are potentially strong evidence, but there remained the possibility that they were made by a Blue Jay or White-breasted Nuthatch. (Paul Carrier's cartoon of the Blue Jay and the Mockingbird provides a humorous illustration of how birds sometimes do an exceedingly good job of fooling us with their imitations.) The vocalizations were also unconnected to any of the visual observations, so they wouldn't necessarily help verify documentation submitted in relation to a specific sighting.

Without question, therefore, the burden of proof escalates with the magnitude of the rarity and the difficulty of identification. Mark Szantyr, current Secretary of the ARCC, concludes that a state committee probably would not accept the Ivory-billed Woodpecker record. The Connecticut equivalent to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker might be the Eskimo Curlew, a bird historically found during fall migration in our state. Because of the extreme rarity and significance of a sighting, and the difficulties of identification, a high-quality series of photographs or videotape might be the only form of acceptable documentation for a modern-day Eskimo Curlew in Connecticut.

But don't despair. Strive to submit the best documentation you can for any Connecticut rarities as soon as possible after you make a sighting. Your contributions will be appreciated by the ARCC and birders throughout Connecticut.

Download a pdf copy of the COA Bulletin at:
<http://homepage.mac.com/reiter.mystic/COA/FileSharing23.html>



Paul Carrier

The North American Breeding Bird Survey

100% Route Coverage Achieved!

The previous issue of the COA Bulletin contained a request for volunteers to assist with the North American Breeding Bird Survey in Connecticut. In a remarkable show of volunteerism, all remaining BBS routes were filled and surveyed before the end of the survey period! This level of coverage represents a vast improvement over recent years. Hopefully, we can maintain a high level of participation in the years to come.

Andrew Dasinger
Connecticut Breeding Bird Survey Coordinator

The Newsletter of the Connecticut Ornithological Association is published quarterly in February, May, September, and December. Please submit materials for the next issue by November 11, 2005, to: Andrew Dasinger at dasingerfamily@cox.net 21 Beechwood Lane, South Glastonbury, CT 06073 or Larry Reiter at reiter.mystic@snet.net 32 West Mystic Ave., Mystic, CT 06355

COA Bulletin

Judge Reaffirms Mute Swan Status

In a key ruling for conservation organizations, native bird species, and the Chesapeake Bay, a federal judge ruled that Mute Swans are not protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This opens the way for the state of Maryland to resume its control of the birds.

Mute Swans are not native to the United States, and are voracious consumers of bay grasses, destroying the food source for native birds and crucial habitat for blue crabs and other marine life. The population of Mute Swans has exploded over the years from five accidentally released birds in 1962 to more than 3,600 birds today.

Conservation organizations, including ABC and the National Audubon Society, were instrumental in the 2004 passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Reform Act, which exempts Mute Swans and other non-native species from the protections afforded to native birds by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). This leg-

islation had been necessitated by The Fund for Animals, who had successfully won a court case the previous year that stopped the state of Maryland from killing Mute Swans based on the protections implied by the MBTA. But as soon as the new Reform Act was signed into law, the Fund for Animals sued again in federal court to block its implementation.

The decision by U.S. District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan should finally put the issue to rest. "The record in this case indicates that Congress did express a clear intent to exclude non-native species, including Mute Swans, from the protections afforded migratory birds by . . . the Migratory Bird Treaty Act," said the judge in his decision. There is no word yet from the state of Maryland as to when they will resume Mute Swan control.

(from Bird Calls, July 2005, published by the American Bird Conservancy)

Dead Trees (continued)

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any other perch. Woodpeckers also use dead trees and branches almost exclusively for drumming, both to attract a mate and to establish and maintain territory boundaries.

In conclusion

Living trees are beautiful, useful organisms, important to the health of our planet, but their value persists long after they die. Some people see dead trees as just an eyesore, but in reality they are vertical stores of nutrients and life, slowly returning their time-collected value back to the environment. Through its death, a tree will give back to its surroundings so much over the many years it takes to ultimately decompose back into soil. Trees are a great example of how nature recycles itself slowly, completely, and with no waste - a natural gift given back to the environment. Part of this gift is the rich assemblage of bird species that use and rely on the dead trees in our living, growing forests.

Some Information from: U.S. Forest Service publications.

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Upcoming Workshops & Events

October 16 (Sunday): Sparrow Field Seminar, Silver Sands State Park, Milford, CT. (No charge)

March 25th 2006 (Saturday): COA Annual Meeting

(see COA webpage for more details)

Continental Shelf Pelagic Expedition

Saturday, October 22, All Day!

Connecticut Ornithological Association and Connecticut Audubon are sponsoring a Pelagic Birding and Marine Life Expedition on Saturday, October 22, 2005, to the edge of the Continental Shelf (foul weather date Oct. 23). This special tour will depart from Old Saybrook, CT, at 2 AM Saturday morning. We will be birding from the deck of the 149-passenger fast-cat "Provincetown III," a magnificent, modern, 96-foot catamaran vessel with a cruising speed of 35 knots. This boat, carefully chosen by Connecticut Audubon, is the best one could ask for in terms of speed, comfort, and stability on a pelagic birding trip. The boat will return at about 8 PM. We are limiting the number of travelers to 90 to make this truly a special event. Wayne Petersen and Charles Avenengo, both long-time and experienced off-shore naturalists, will be leading this excursion. Fee: \$195. Call 800-996-8747 for a brochure and reservations.

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for membership form and additional
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