

Why bother with description species?

A very personal view – Dylan Wrathall

Why am I writing this? Because I can, I suppose, combined with the fact that we live in a democracy where freedom of opinion is still a fundamental right.

Hence, whilst the “Norfolk Mafia”, the County OS network and the BBRC/BOURC have ample exposure in the media, so are able to promote their point of view - this is my alternative slant on things! It is quite feasible that I am completely out of touch with the rest of birding, due to the basic fact that I spend an inordinate amount of my time birding alone. However, I do converse with other birders, either in the field or via the Internet, and am forming the opinion that all is not well with the “grass roots” birders confidence in the present system.

With this in mind – every birder has two choices! Do nothing – nothing changes. Do something – things will change, but not necessarily as you had envisaged. My own “do something” is to opt out of the system entirely. I no longer submit records or descriptions to any ornithological organisation, although I am still in direct contact with many of the colour ringing schemes across Europe (they don’t require descriptions just ring details!) and regularly post my sightings on Planetthenet. I am now free to go birding, unhindered by those who seek to govern the way I enjoy my hobby. I haven’t made one iota of difference to status of ornithology within the UK, but I now go birding without the burden of conforming to those who seek to influence my activities.

The down side, for what it’s worth, is that my name doesn’t appear in the annual Bird Reports – “What a choker!”

I have a real problem with others (completely unknown & un-elected by me) sitting in judgement of my birding prowess based upon my ability to convey my sightings in a written format. That they have the added arrogance to decide which species I can, and can’t, be expected to identify in the field is just too much. Remember that the species requiring descriptions varies from county to county across the UK. Here, in Kent, Pallas’s Warbler = no description, a bloody Dipper, Storm Petrel or Bee-eater, well I couldn’t possibly be able to identify one without the blessing of the “committee”. This is not a gripe about the KOS, or any other local OS, but the whole pointlessness of the procedure. World travel has never been easier, the quality of the id guides, be they written, in CD-rom/ DVD format or posted on the Internet, is superb thus birders are better equipped, than ever, to confidently identify birds in the field. Before this goes too much further, I must remove the rarity status from the agenda. In general rare birds in the UK tend to be common birds outside of their normal range. There are obvious exceptions – Tim Cleeve’s Slender-billed Curlew immediately springs to mind but, by and large, the waifs and strays that cause adrenalin rushes for the twitchers and ecstasy for the finder/patch watcher are species that occur in healthy numbers within their normal ranges. The excitement and joy they bring by turning up in unexpected places is only marred by the insistence of the “pigeon-hole brigade” that the bird will only obtain “official status” after “**they**” have pontificated on the

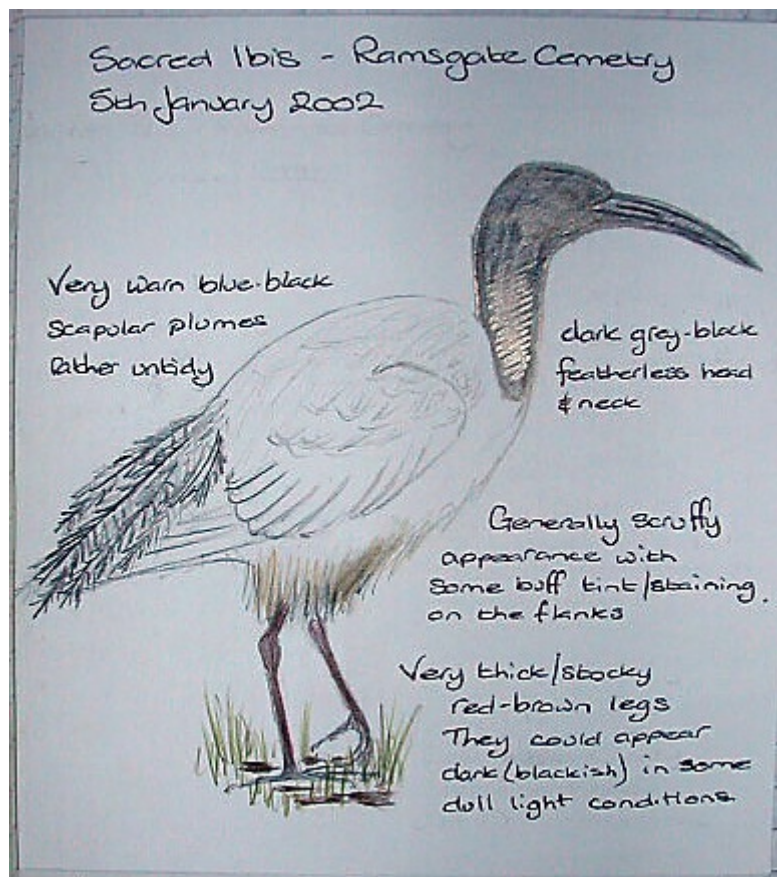
merits of the sighting, based upon the finders ability to convey the sighting into words!



How many county bird clubs still require descriptions of Hoopoe? Why? What else could it be? Such a waste of effort for all concerned – those that submit the written report & those that sit in judgement!

There will never be a recording system that will please all of the people all of the time, but surely there has to be something better than what we have at the moment? I am fully aware of the legal ramifications involved with acceptance of a new species for the UK list. Thus, it will never be possible to remove the need for descriptions entirely but, with a little more good faith on the part of the County O.S network, it should be possible to drastically reduce the workload of the various rarity bodies and encourage more field birders to forward their sightings. I find it mind-numbing that County OS's can justify the time spent on judging rarity records when, in some cases, the species involved are as obvious as Avocet or Spoonbill! If any individual is deliberately

prepared to submit erroneous records, nothing within the present system exists to stop this. For those who wish to “make a name” for themselves it is easy to fabricate a written description and submit it for scrutiny. With a system that is as arbitrary as ours there are bound to be flaws that can be exploited by the devious. So what would be the problem if County O.S’s were able to accept all birds reported to them at face value? The answer is nothing of detriment to the well being of mankind but a major increase in reported sightings due to the removal of being labelled a liar (or at least mistaken) by a rejected record. Take this a step further and allow the BOURC/BBRC to preside over the first 10 records of any species e.g. a new species for the UK list or one that hasn’t occurred in the passed 25 years. After that, all records are accepted without challenge. Sure there will be errors, but does it really matter? Birders are not criminals, is there any justifiable reason why they should be “guilty” until proven innocent when the whole basis of our democracy is the complete opposite?



Sacred Ibis in Ramsgate Cemetery 5th January 2002

Not considered worthy of note by local, or national, authorities! Absolutely no doubt as to the identity, yet the “dubious origin” tag overshadowed the likelihood of vagrancy from the rapidly expanding feral population in Brittany. Why bother sending details?

Mistakenly claiming identity of a bird is not “crime of the century” nor is it likely to lead to the breakdown of civilization, as we know it. It wouldn’t take too long to work out if there were birders (?) abusing the system. A genuine mistake is easy enough to understand, yet if anyone is happy to lie to him or herself – there can be no system able to account for, or detect, this behaviour if that individual is so motivated. Modern technology, and the ease of communication, generally means that any rare bird turning up in the UK is subjected to the attentions the “twitching brigade” and, as a result, is captured in digital format by one or more within the massed ranks.

It’s only my opinion, but just how many more useful records would the various O.S groups receive if they were able to accept everything? It is, surely, the documentary evidence of common species that allows judgements on future planning applications to be made, not the occurrence of “rarities” that sways the balance. As stated at the beginning, I’m on the outside – looking in. All I see is a complete nonsense! An unfair assessment? Maybe, but when all said and done, it is only a hobby – **NOT A SCIENCE!** Why the need for so many rules?

Dylan – February 2006



What a waste! This Penduline Tit will never appear in any “official” record of the avian events of Kent (the UK) because I’ve opted out of the game. How did I describe it? – Oh yeah - my mistake! It’s a Red-backed Shrike!