

Paper to PDF: Gent and Liu Fill 30-year gap in Rare Bird Records

150 Years of Bird Record-Keeping in Colorado

By Heather McGregor

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A neck-banded Trumpeter Swan spotted in Littleton in 1975 and tracked to its original bander in Alberta, Canada. A starving Magnificent Frigatebird that attacked a windsurfer on Green Mountain Reservoir in 1985. An injured Gyrfalcon found on a roadside near Center in 1997, meticulously sketched by a birder as part of his Bird Records submission.

These are some of the gems recently added to the archives of rare bird sightings on the Colorado Bird Records Committee website. It's a multi-year effort by Peter Gent, chair of the Bird Records Committee, with help from Winston Liu, a CFO member with a scanner in his home office. Gent, of Boulder, and Liu, of Lafayette, are filling in a 30-year gap in CFO's online record of rare bird sightings by scanning nearly 1,600 sets of paper documentations and uploading them to the Colorado Bird Records website.

These paper documentations of rare bird sightings date from the committee's founding in 1972 to 2006, when the committee made its final transition to all-electronic submissions. These files provide the detail-rich supporting evidence for rare bird sightings that, in most cases, were already posted to the Colorado Bird Records website, but in bare-bones form. Listings that consisted only of a date, location and the names of those making the submission are now, gradually, gaining the full depth of information about the sighting.

150 Years of Bird Record-Keeping in Colorado

Records of bird sightings in Colorado go back to the 1870s, and were maintained for nearly a century by the Denver Museum of Natural History, now the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Museum curators collected hundreds of bird specimens and kept card files to track sightings. In 1965, the museum published an authoritative, narratively rich and beautifully illustrated compilation of sightings,



Peter Gent, center, Chair of the Colorado Bird Records Committee, initiated the project to digitize old paper records of bird sightings.



Winston Liu is assisting Gent by scanning hundreds of old paper records. He has come across several gems in the process.

setting the state's list at 439 species. The two-volume "*Birds of Colorado*" was researched and written by museum director Alfred M. Bailey and staff naturalist Robert J. Niedrach, both with extensive field experience in Colorado and across the globe (Bailey, 1946), with plates painted by 23 artists and photographs by 36 photographers.

In 1992, a new generation of museum staff and active birders across the state, led by Robert Andrews and Robert Righter, produced a compilation that set the state's documented species list at 444. "*Colorado Birds: A Reference to their Distribution and Habitat*," also published by the Denver Museum of Natural History, includes range maps, seasonal occurrence bars, population status and records for each species. (By 2025, Colorado's accepted list of species reached 521.)

While Colorado Field Ornithologists first formed in 1935 as the Colorado Bird Club, CFO did not begin to systematically track bird sightings until 1972. That's when Jack Reddall and other CFO members formed what was called the Official Records Committee (Reddall, 1973). The project gave birders across Colorado an opportunity to fill out a multi-page form documenting their rare bird sightings. It also established what's now known as the Bird Records Committee, a team of experts that scrutinized submissions and voted on whether they should be accepted, laid aside for further evidence, or not accepted. For the next 30-some years, sightings were submitted in paper form, circulated by mail to committee members and published in the *Colorado Birds* journal.

By the late 1990s, committee members began building an electronic spreadsheet to keep track of accepted sightings. Over time, members also tapped the Denver Museum books to note the earliest sightings of rare birds, and added many of those records to the spreadsheet. In 2004, Mark Peterson, a committee member, built the first version of the Colorado Bird Records website, setting up an online submission form and the means for committee members to vote on records using the website. Paper documentations still trickled in, but by 2006, all submissions were submitted and reviewed electronically.

Websites gained sophistication over the next decade, and members of the Bird Records Committee sought a more robust version for their site, according to Doug Faulkner, a former editor of *Colorado Birds* and former Records Committee member and chair. Faulkner's connection with Kay Niyo of Evergreen, a former editor of Iowa's state birding journal, linked him to Des Moines resident Ann Johnson, who had built Iowa's bird records website in 2000. CFO hired Johnson to build a new Colorado site, which launched in 2013 (Johnson and Faulkner, 2013). This site continues to serve the Colorado Bird Records Committee today, at COBRC.org. It's separate from CFO's organizational website, CoBirds.org, and users must set up a separate account from their CFO account.

To populate the site, Johnson used the Records Committee's spreadsheet that, at the time, contained more than 3,200 records. The overhauled site added a submission portal that warns birders if their sighting is not as rare as they might think, as well as an option to upload photos and audio, a searchable database, and an archive of Bird Records Committee annual reports. Johnson still maintains the CBRC website, and recently added a feature to make it easy to directly submit eBird reports to the website. The current committee consists of nine members, seven of whom vote on each record, which ensures that committee members do not vote on their own records.

Sort, Discard, Sort Again, Scan, Upload

From the 1870s to the present, birders have kept track of sightings, employing the customs and technology of their times. It began as collected specimens and card files in museum drawers, then evolved into paper records and photos in manila file folders, and are now electronic records with digital images and audio hosted on the CBRC website and accessible in a searchable database. The work under way by Gent and Liu is taking the last remnants of hard copy documents from the paper records phase and digitizing them for the online archive.

Previous Bird Records Committee members started some of this scanning work for the 2013 website, Faulkner said, but the boxes were numerous and the task was daunting. Now with Gent and Liu chipping away at the stacks, the skimpy online



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LEWIS'S WOODPECKER
(adult male)

NORTHERN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER
(adult male)

PILEATED WOODPECKER
(female or juv.)

Plate 73



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WOOD DUCK (male, male and female male)

SHOVELER (juvenile male, adult female and male)

AMERICAN WIGEON (adult male and female)

Plate 16



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BLACK-NECKED STILT
AMERICAN AVOCET

Plate 55



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FLAMMULATED OWL
PYGMY OWL
BOREAL OWL
SCREECH OWL
SAW-WHET OWL

Plate 65

Four of the 124 color plates, painted by 23 artists, included in the two-volume "Birds of Colorado," published in 1965 by the Denver Museum of Natural History. Upper left, Plate 73, Lewis's Woodpecker, top, (Northern) Three-toed Woodpecker, lower left, and Pileated Woodpeckers, painted by Donald L. Malick. Upper right, Plate 16, Wood Ducks, top, (Northern) Shovelers, middle, and American Wigeon, bottom, painted by Peter Scott. Lower left, Plate 55, Black-necked Stilt and American Avocet, painted by Roger Tory Peterson. Lower right, Plate 65, Flammulated Owl, upper left, Pygmy Owl, upper right, Boreal Owl, center, (Western) Screech Owl, lower left, and (Northern) Saw-whet Owl, lower right, painted by Donald L. Malick. Plates from "Birds of Colorado, Vols. I and II," courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

records of the paper era are gaining the documents birders submitted to validate their sightings. “We tried this as a pilot, but it fizzled out. It takes a lot of time,” Faulkner said. “Peter and Winston should be given a medal of some kind.”

The paper-era supporting detail typically starts with CFO’s two-page submission form, with questions calling for details about the bird’s size, shape, plumage and behavior, along with the habitat and the birder’s prior experience identifying the rare bird and similar species. Birders also submitted letters, sketches, copies of photographs, newspaper clippings, mentions in scholarly journals and articles from the CFO Journal. Together, these observations and other evidence tell some intriguing stories about rare bird sightings during this time. (More about that TRSW, MAFR and GYRF below.)

To make this trove of detail available online, Gent’s first task was to hunt through the files, which had been organized by date, to eliminate the duplicate copies. In that pre-digital era, the Bird Records Committee made several paper copies of each submitted sighting, which were then circulated, by mail, to committee members. A lot of those duplicates ended up in the file boxes. Gent said it took about a year to weed out duplicates while making sure one copy of every sighting remained. “Most were copies, but for about 5 percent, there was no other record of that sighting,” he said.

He spent another six months re-sorting all the records into files by species, and then sorting the species files to the current taxonomic order. By the end of 2022, Gent had the files pared down and organized to align with the taxonomic structure of the Colorado Bird Records website. Now he needed help with the digital scanning. CFO Board Member Megan Jones Patterson put out a call to members, and Winston Liu stepped forward. “My first scan was on Jan. 29, 2023, for a Fulvous Whistling-Duck,” Liu said. That folder had only one documented sighting, from Weld County in 1990 by Jerry Cairo and Joseph Himmel.

“Peter asked me to start with the species that had the least number of records. Now we are into the species with more documented sightings,” said Liu. “I just scanned about 24 sightings for Scarlet Tanager.” Once the documents are scanned and joined into a single PDF for each sighting, Liu emails those PDFs back to Gent, who then uses a backside portal on the website to upload the PDF file. By August 2025, Gent and Liu had scanned and uploaded about 700 sets of documentations, leaving about 800 more to go.

Most uploads take about 10 minutes, because Gent must take the extra step of creating a location map for that sighting’s webpage. Using the birder’s narrative as a guide, Gent locates the spot on an electronic map to obtain the latitude and longitude coordinates, adding that data to the sighting’s page. Once he enters the

coordinates, website visitors can click on a tiny Colorado map to get a pop-up window showing a map or satellite view of the exact location.

An oddity Gent has dealt with is the two systems of numbering for rare bird sightings. In 1972, Jack Reddall set up a three-number system in which the first number was based on the taxonomic order of bird families at the time, the second was the last two digits of the year of the sighting, and the third was the sighting's chronological number as it was submitted that year. Thus, the code for that Fulvous Whistling-Duck is "8-90-14," with "8" for the family of ducks and geese, "90" for the submission in 1990, and "14" for Cairo and Himmel submitting the 14th rare bird sighting for that year.

When Larry Semo took over as chair of the committee in 1997, he was well aware that bird taxonomy was changing and Reddall's numbering protocol had become obsolete, Gent said. By then, ducks and geese, for example, showed up at the top of the taxonomic list. Semo implemented a simple, durable two-number protocol. The first number is the four-digit year of the sighting, and the second number remains the sighting's chronological number as it was submitted that year, but in three-digit form. Sightings submitted since 1997 use this two-number code, as do historic sightings that have been added to the website since then. Thus, the first state record of a Crissal Thrasher, seen Nov. 30, 2024, in Cottonwood Canyon by Brian Genge and Luke Pheneger, and a few days later by Josh Bruening, is numbered 2024-032.



Left, Plate 64, Black-billed Cuckoo, top, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, middle, and Roadrunner, by Orville O. Rice. At right, Plate 32, Prairie Falcon, top, and Peregrine Falcon, bottom, by E.L. Poole. Plates from "Birds of Colorado, Vols. I and II," courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science.



Similarly, the new system is applied to many historic records, such as the September 1927 collection of an Anhinga in Adams County by Jacob Muzik, numbered 1927-001.

Now, About that Wayward Swan, the Desperate Frigatebird and the Injured Gyrfalcon

Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*), Dec. 1, 1975, Bowles Lake in Littleton, Arapahoe County, and Main Reservoir near Lakewood, Jefferson County. Record No. 8-75-160.

Walter Graul, a non-game wildlife officer with what was the Colorado Division of Wildlife, spotted a Trumpeter in the mostly-frozen Bowles Lake that afternoon, along with two Mute Swans. He noted a six-inch-wide yellow neck collar on the bird, and was able to read the band number with his 10-power binoculars: 18TA. As explained in a letter to Jack Reddall, Graul tracked the band number to Dr. W.D. Stephens of the Canada Wildlife Service in Edmonton, Alberta. Stephens had banded the bird in the Grand Prairie region 280 miles north of Edmonton, on Sept. 9, 1975. “Banding recoveries indicate that the Grand Prairie Trumpeter Swan population winters along the Snake River in Idaho. So, the Bowles Lake bird appeared to be off-course!” Graul wrote.

The Associated Press picked up the story, published in the *Denver Post* on Dec. 7, 1975. An alert reader, Henry Pelon of Denver, had also seen the swan several miles away on the grassy western shore of Main Reservoir, and took a photo with his Kodak Instamatic X30. He contacted Graul and submitted his own rare bird report to CFO. “Alert and somewhat shy. Walked very slowly, large feet about the size of a man’s hand. When the bird flew away, the wingspread looked as if it might be as much as 8 feet,” Pelon wrote.

Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*), Sept. 14, 1985, near Chatfield Reservoir, Arapahoe County, and Sept. 16, 1985, on Green Mountain Reservoir, Summit County. Record No. N-85-35.

Hans-Joachim Feddern and Thomas Clay Bohanon, both of Littleton, spotted the Frigatebird twice on Sept. 14, for about five minutes each time, circling high in the air in the Chatfield Reservoir area. They first saw it near a hot air balloon, chased it in their car and spotted it again circling over a pond at Kipling and Ken Caryl. Betsy Webb, then-curator of zoology at the Denver Museum of Natural History, takes up the story in her vivid article, “Against All Odds: First Record of a Magnificent Frigatebird in Colorado,” published in the Winter 1985 edition of the *CFO Journal* (Webb, 1985).



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TRUMPETER SWAN
WHISTLING SWAN

Plate 10

Plate 10, a pair of Trumpeter Swans, top, and a pair of Whistling Swans (now called Tundra Swans), painted by F.L. Jaques. Plate from "Birds of Colorado, Vols. I and II," courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

Webb reported more sightings of the bird, next from Marion Metsopoulos of Lakewood, who saw the bird circle overhead, and then from Heeney, 50 miles west and over the Continental Divide, where E.R. Timken and his neighbor, John Colishaw, spotted it over Green Mountain Reservoir. The story takes a dark turn two days later at the reservoir, when the bird hovered over and then attacked windsurfer Jerry Mulliken of Vail, delivering a gash to one of his hands while striking at him with its bill and feet.

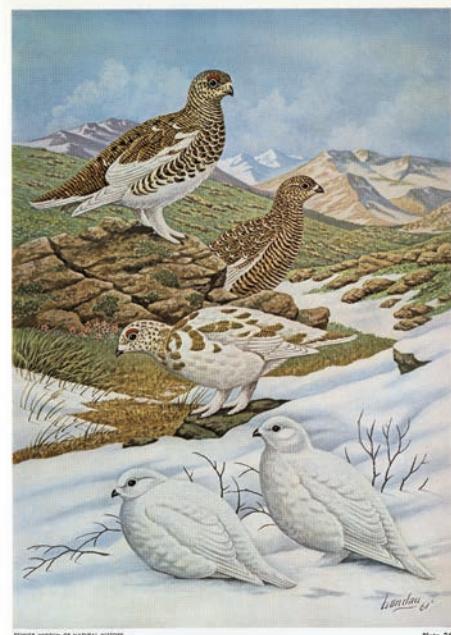
“Mulliken made it to shore with the bird in pursuit. In defense, a group of windsurfers gathered onshore began throwing stones to ward off the attacks,” Webb wrote. Taking hits to its body and head, the bird soared upward, and then fell to the ground. Its right wing was broken and bleeding, and an older wound on its neck was infected. “The group that had gathered decided to dispatch the bird by wringing its neck.” Webb reported.

Mulliken kept the carcass and called the Division of Wildlife. Officer Bill Andree retrieved the carcass, identified the rare tropical bird, put it in a freezer and then sent the frozen carcass to the Denver Museum of Natural History. A necropsy there revealed a wounded female bird, in molt, 30 percent underweight with no body fat and a gut packed with parasitic roundworms. Webb noted that Hurricane Elena had recently ripped across the Gulf of Mexico, and may have blown the bird inland and more than 1,000 miles out of its normal range.

Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*), Dec. 13, 1997, near Center, Saguache County. Record No. 1997-22.

Wildlife veterinarians Herman and Susan Dieterich, then-owners of the Frisco Creek Wildlife Hospital and Rehabilitation Center near Del Norte, picked up an injured falcon on Dec. 13, 1997, from a roadside near the Bigelow Springs ponds on Saguache County Road C, along with the Mallard hen it had caught. They took the bird to their facility to care for its injuries. Susan asked John Rawinski, then a U.S. Forest Service soil scientist in the San Luis Valley, to help identify the bird, which she described as “either a Gyrfalcon, or a Prairie Falcon on steroids.” Rawinski visited the wildlife rehab center on Dec. 17, 1997, with another local birder, Jerry Poe, and again on Jan. 17, 1998, with his wife, Lisa Rawinski. All three concurred with Susan’s identification of the bird as an immature female Gyrfalcon.

Rawinski’s initial submission, made Jan. 23, 1998, included a narrative description using the CFO Sight Record Form, a low-light photograph taken at the rehab center on Dec. 17, and a detailed sketch. “This bird dwarfed other similar falcons,” Rawinski wrote. His first impression when Susan opened the cage door “was of a turkey on a platter … it was huge.” In a nearby flight cage were an adult Peregrine and an adult Prairie Falcon. “It was awesome to see the size differences!” Rawinski



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WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN

(Top: male and female in spring; center: male in fall; bottom: adults in winter white.)

Plate 36



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SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER

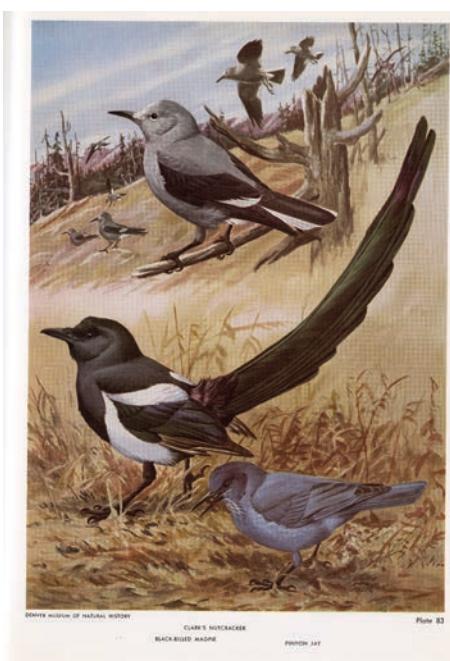
Plate 76



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LARK BUNTING
(Female and male)

Plate 117



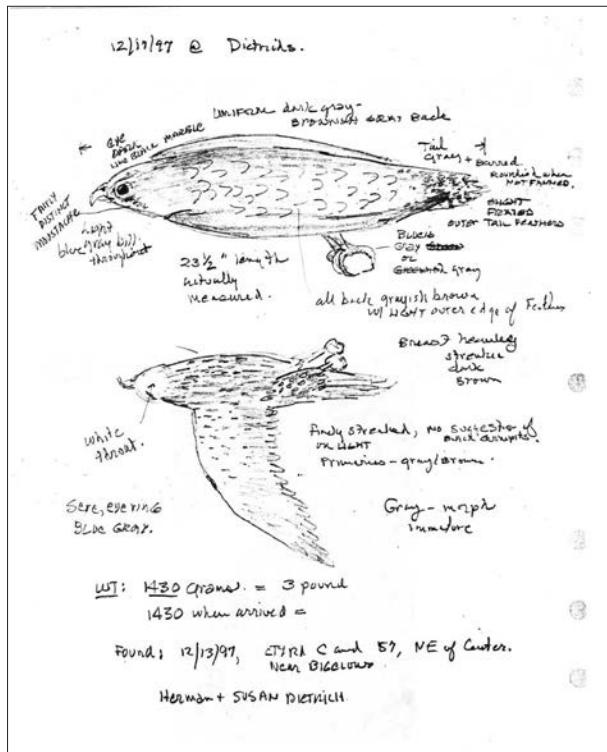
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CLARK'S NUTCRACKER
BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE

PINYON JAY

Plate 83

Upper left, Plate 36, White-tailed Ptarmigan, shown in spring plumage at top, male in fall plumage at center, and in winter plumage at center, and in winter plumage at bottom, painted by Dexter F. Landau. Upper right, Plate 76, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, painted by Donald L. Malick. Lower left, Plate 117, Lark Bunting female and male, painted by Don. R. Eckelberry. Lower right, Plate 83, a trio of corvids with Clark's Nutcracker, top, Black-billed Magpie, lower left, and Pinyon Jay, lower right, painted by Donald L. Malick. Plates from "Birds of Colorado, Vols. I and II," courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science.



John Rawinski of Monte Vista included this detailed sketch of an injured Gyrfalcon with his 1998 submission of a rare bird sighting to the Colorado Bird Records Committee. In the era before affordable digital cameras, some birders included sketches when they submitted rare bird sightings.

Wildlife rehabilitators Herman and Susan Dietrich found the falcon lying injured on a roadside near Center, in Saguache County, in December, 1997. Rawinski made the sketch after viewing the bird a few days later at the Dietrich's Frisco Creek Wildlife Hospital. He noted several indicators in plumage that led to the identification, along with the bird's sizable weight and length.

noted. His full-page sketch showed two views of the bird, back and belly, pointing out distinctive plumage and measurements.

In scanning hundreds of pages of documents from the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Winston Liu has come across many such drawings. "I admire these sketches. Some are truly pieces of art," he said. In an era before widespread availability of digital cameras, sketches of rare bird sightings could illustrate field marks, habitat and, in Rawinski's sketch, precise measurements and plumage notations that helped identify the bird. "I really admire people who have that talent," Liu said.

Still, the Bird Records Committee had doubts, suspecting the bird could have been an escaped captive. Two rounds of committee voting were split. It wasn't until Rawinski submitted a supporting letter from Susan Dieterich in December 1998, along with a memo describing his conversation with Kathy Konishi, falcon permit specialist with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, that the records committee cast a 7-0 vote to accept.

While the Dieterichs successfully cared for hundreds of injured animals during the 15 years they owned the Frisco Creek facility (Malmsbury, 2004), they could not overcome the Gyrfalcon's injuries. "Over a period of two months, medical and surgical management of this falcon was insufficient to overcome subsequent metabolic deterioration," Susan Dieterich wrote. The bird died Feb. 16, 1998.



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Plate 34

BLUE GROUSE
(adult female and male)

Dusky Grouse, Plate 34 from "Birds of Colorado," painted by Owen J. Gromme courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife now owns and operates the Frisco Creek wildlife rehabilitation center. John Rawinski continues to actively bird and look for rare species from his home in Monte Vista. He is the author of *Birding Hotspots of South-central Colorado*, a guide to the best birding locations in the San Luis Valley, and is at work on a forthcoming memoir about his decades of experience in documenting rare birds in the valley.

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