

WRITING BIRD DESCRIPTIONS: RULING OUT OTHER SPECIES

Tony Leukering
Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory
14500 Lark Bunting Lane
Brighton, CO 80603
cbrc@cfo-link.org

A friend once said that using only one field mark, it is impossible to separate Red-eyed Vireo from Black-crowned Night-Heron. As a member of the Colorado Bird Records Committee (CBRC or Committee) for the past six years, I have seen the truth of that statement many times. As stated in many CBRC reports in this journal, most of the reports submitted to the Committee that were not accepted, were not accepted simply because the birds were not described well enough to make the case for the reported identification. I can point to few reports that were the result of obvious mis-identification. With the hope of clarifying the features that Committee members look for in a written description in order to vote to accept a record, I present my thoughts on writing documentation, particularly in ruling out all other reasonable species from consideration.

You might be surprised to know that some documentations received by the CBRC have **no** written description and no photos—nothing in the way of information to enable committee members to judge whether the identification is correct. With the provision of at least some description of plumage, structure, and behavioral features, which most documentations have, each CBRC member then determines whether the description is convincing. So, the more details, the better.

The most critical aspect of any rare bird documentation is the written description of what was seen, referring to the plumage and other features of the bird and its behavior. The written description is the “scientific” proof that an individual (or multiple individuals) of a particular species of bird occurred at a particular place on a particular date. This description is critical even if excellent photos support the identification. Without written descriptions, many pieces of information are lost forever. While pictures are great and you will not hear a single CBRC member complain about too many photographs, those photos are single images of a bird or flock of birds; they may not convey everything that a thorough, well-written description could provide.

In addition to describing why the bird is such a species, make sure to not only

describe the bird you saw, but also describe how you ruled out other, similar species from consideration. And, do not just consider the very obvious identification contenders. This elimination of other species needs to be done whether other species (or multiple other species) is more likely at the time and place or not. Try to look at your description from the point of view of a birder who does not know what the bird is supposed to be and that is attempting to identify the bird solely from your words. Could that person eliminate everything else? That is precisely what the CBRC members need to do.

So, a quick recap: a written description is critical. A thorough description is better than a sketchy description. Details on how other, similar, species were eliminated from consideration are also critical.

With that, let us get into the meat of the matter (or the tofu for the vegetarians among us). Below, I will provide some hypothetical examples of descriptions of birds compared to some actual descriptions of birds to illustrate what makes a good description and what sorts of details might subject a report to the Not Accepted category.

Example 1:

Someone reports a Red-eyed Vireo in December at Lathrop State Park, Huerfano County. Since the species is very rare anywhere in the United States in December, the observer is correct in submitting details to the CBRC as this would be a significant record. The only description of the bird that the observer provides is, "The bird had red eyes." The report has provided the species, location, date, time, and observer(s). So the Committee members reading the documentation will know what the purported identification is. However, I can guarantee that this report will not get a single vote to accept. From this description, my friend would point out, the members cannot tell whether the bird is a Red-eyed Vireo or a Black-crowned Night-Heron. Or a Common Loon. Or a Clark's Grebe. Or a Hairy Woodpecker. Or a Spotted Towhee. One field mark, even if distinctive for a regularly-occurring Colorado vireo, is insufficient support for what would be a continentally significant record. This description provides no basis for the identification other than eye color. No size, no shape, no behavior, no other field marks.

Now, a different hypothetical observer reports on the same occurrence and provides the following details: "crown darker than superciliary, red eyes, pale underparts." Okay, so now our CBRC members can eliminate Spotted Towhee from consideration, but all of the other possibilities mentioned in the previous example are still in play and the vote will still be 0-7 (0 votes to accept, 7 to not accept).

A third observer might submit these details: “a small bird foraging methodically in the canopy of a cottonwood; red eyes, no markings apparent on wings, no eye ring, whitish on chest.” Well, it’s getting better, but the voting members still have to make too many assumptions. The bird is “small,” but how small? Hairy Woodpecker is small, relative to Black-crowned Night-Heron, Common Loon, and Clark’s Grebe. Hairy Woodpeckers also forage rather methodically and often in the canopy of cottonwoods. The species also lacks eye rings. Additionally, the Rockies race of Hairy Woodpecker has no markings in the coverts on the wing, so the wing can appear unmarked, given a brief look or a poor angle. The third observer still has not convinced anyone on the CBRC.

A fourth observer’s effort: “An obvious vireo, due to the small size (similar to size of Yellow-rumped Warbler nearby in the same tree), bluish legs, and straight bill with a distinct hook and by its behavior of foraging in the canopy of the cottonwood it was in, peering at vegetation at length from one perch, then moving to another perch and repeating; the bird had a medium-gray crown contrasting with a whitish superciliary; a dark eyeline extended from the bill through the red eyes almost to the nape; the upperparts were greenish, as was the tail; the underparts were white, except for extensive pale to brightish yellow on the sides and flanks; the wings, which I saw well, were unmarked (no wing bars).” Okay! Now, we are getting somewhere. Would you vote to accept?

While this description would probably garner some accept votes, in the end, the report would probably wind up in the “Not Accepted” section of that year’s CBRC report. “Why,” you ask adamantly, “the details do a very good job at describing a Red-eyed Vireo. They definitely eliminate all those other species mentioned above.” Correct. Unfortunately, as I stated earlier, a Red-eyed Vireo in December would be incredibly out-of-the-ordinary and some other, rather unexpected species might be just as likely as Red-eyed Vireo. The above details do not eliminate the most likely of these, Yellow-green Vireo, which has a propensity to wander in fall to the West Coast of the U.S. with records into December. The details also do not eliminate the less-likely, but still hypothetically possible, Black-whiskered Vireo.

So, a convincing description of a Red-eyed Vireo in December will need to eliminate these two tropical vireos by mentioning the distinct blackish lower border to the gray crown, the brightness of the superciliary and its strong contrast in the supraloral region to both the crown and the eyeline, and the distinct lack of a dark lateral throat stripe, among other features *in addition to*

all of the other features mentioned by our fourth observer. Now, were the occurrence in June when the species is a lot more likely in Colorado, if the CBRC reviewed the report at all, it might allow a lot more leeway to the observer and the fourth description might be accepted.

Example 2:

A report of a Field Sparrow at Escalante State Wildlife Area, Delta County, in February has the following written details: “A sparrow, with pinkish bill and legs, reddish-brown on the crown, and white wing bars, foraging on the ground with three White-crowned Sparrows.” While the description is certainly not inconsistent with an identification of Field Sparrow, do these details eliminate all other probably and possible (and not-so-possible) options? Remember, this bird is on the West Slope in winter, both aspects that are not associated with typical Field Sparrow occurrence in Colorado. Did you guess that the CBRC would almost certainly vote to not accept this report as correctly identified? You are correct. Remember that by using the phrase, “correctly identified,” I am not at all ruling out the possibility that the bird was correctly identified. The Committee simply could not determine the accuracy of the identification by the details provided. In fact, the details could not even eliminate immature White-crowned Sparrow from consideration. A simple mention that the bird was obviously smaller than the nearby White-crowned Sparrows would have done the trick. And, that detail could have been presented in the description (“... foraging with, and obviously much smaller than, three White-crowned Sparrows”) or in the section on how similar species were eliminated from consideration (“Not an immature White-crowned Sparrow, as that species is much larger...”). The last phrase has the added benefit of showing the CBRC members that the observer is aware that immature White-crowned Sparrows are different from adults and can be confused with Field Sparrow. I have seen this very mistake made more than a couple of times!

A recent, more thorough, actual submission to the CBRC included these details about a February report of a Field Sparrow: “The sparrow was noticeably smaller than the juncos it was found with. The throat, breast, and underparts were uniformly gray. There were no markings on the throat. The breast was clear with no streaks or central spot. The back was rufous and brown with lengthwise dark streaks. The head had a rufous crown. The bill was small and conical in shape and uniformly yellow-orange in color. The color was very similar to the bill color of a White-crowned Sparrow. The sparrow had a white eye ring that made a perfect circle completely around the eye. The eye ring was very conspicuous and immediately noticeable when the sparrow was seen in side view. The side of the head was gray below the rufous crown with a rufous stripe through the eye. The wings were brown with two conspicuous

white wing bars. The tail was long and narrow with a slight notch at the tip. (Neither the leg color nor the top of the crown were observed.) Similar species would be the sparrows with plain breasts and rufous crowns: American Tree Sparrow has a central spot on the breast, does not have a conspicuous eye ring, and the bill is bicolored. Immature White-crowned Sparrow is much larger and does not have a conspicuous eye ring. Chipping Sparrow has black line through the eye and white line above eye, no conspicuous eye ring, and the bill is not orange. Rufous-crowned Sparrow has black whisker marks on throat, no conspicuous eye ring, no white wing bars, and the bill is not orange. Rufous-winged Sparrow has black whisker marks on the throat, no conspicuous eye ring, and no white wing bars.”

This excellent description (record #2002-29), written by Rich Miller, was accepted by the CBRC by a 7-0 vote. Its key qualities:

- First, that the observer systematically described the bird: the underparts from stem to stern and then the upperparts from head to tail, rather than jumping from the wings, to the beak, to the legs, to the back, to the eyes.
- The observer made the CBRC aware that some parts just could not be seen. They were not ignored, the details were not forgotten—they were not seen despite effort to see them. The Committee is very appreciative of people doing this, as the members are then aware that the observer was aware of the importance of these features, such as the pink legs and gray central crown stripe of Field Sparrow, in the species’ separation from similar species, but that he or she simply could not see them.
- Finally, the observer eliminated all possible identification contenders, even going so far as the sedentary and extremely-unlikely-to-occur-in-Colorado Rufous-winged Sparrow for which there are no records north of southern Arizona. The CBRC would not have cared had the observer not considered that species, but commends such thoroughness, which points out to the Committee that the observer was thinking about all possibilities, no matter how remote, when identifying the bird in question. Thinking of all the possibilities reduces the likelihood of going astray when identifying any bird, but is critically important when describing a rare bird.

Example3:

In this example, remember that gulls are particularly difficult and incredibly

variable in plumage. Thus, sometimes, excruciating detail is required to convince the Committee, though the final description in this example, in my opinion, is not “excruciating.”

In a hypothetical documentation submitted to the Committee, an adult Mew Gull is reported in November from Sullenburger Reservoir, Archuleta County. Details included are: “Gray wings, dark eyes, yellow bill, yellowish-green legs.” Anyone who has spent any time at all identifying gulls knows that most of the world’s species, in some plumage or another, could be covered by this description, including the most likely species to occur at that place and time, Ring-billed Gull. This common Colorado species does have gray wings, yellow bill, and yellow or yellowish legs after its first year. Also, Ring-billed Gulls can still have dark eyes in their second cycle when their wings are gray and their bills are yellow. The description does not say that the bill was unmarked, that is, lacking the typical ring of a Ring-billed Gull. It does not mention the darkness of the gray. It does not even determine the age of the bird (something **very** critical in some groups, such as shorebirds and gulls). The description also does not eliminate the next most likely species, California Gull. In fact, if it weren’t for the color of the legs, the description would not even rule out Yellow-billed Loon or Elegant Trogon! The vote will be 0-7.

A better set of details is provided by another observer: “A gull (gray upperparts, white underparts, black wingtips, swimming in lake) slightly smaller and slightly darker-mantled than a nearby Ring-billed Gull; unmarked yellow bill, dark eyes, distinct scapular crescent and broader tertial crescent than the Ring-billed.” Good. The observer managed to eliminate both Ring-billed and California gulls and Mew Gull is probably the most likely candidate. Unfortunately, the vote should still be 0-7, as Black-legged Kittiwake is not eliminated by the details provided.

Here is an actual description of a Mew Gull from a recent circulation: “The bird was an obvious smaller white-headed gull among Ring-billed Gulls which were slightly bigger than it. The white head was heavily mottled with brown, with a distinct concentration of brown mottling on the nape. The bill was shorter and thinner than those of the Ring-billed Gulls and was virtually unmarked yellow. The eyes were dark. The mantle was a medium gray, a shade or two darker than those of the Ring-billed Gulls. The wings were long, with the wingtip extending well past the tail (the tail only reached the tip of P7). The underparts were white and the legs were a weird greeny-yellow. The outermost primary (P10) had a very large mirror and P9 had a smaller, but still substantial, mirror. Each of these mirrors was considerably larger than the respective mirrors on the Ring-billed Gulls. P8 had only a small amount of black proximal to the white tip. Similar

species eliminated: Ring-billed Gull can be easily ruled out by bill size and pattern, eye color, head pattern, mantle color, and wingtip pattern. Common Gull (*L. c. canus*) is more difficult to eliminate from consideration, but wingtip pattern does the trick, as does (probably) mantle coloration. California Gull is ruled out on size, bill pattern, and wingtip pattern. Black-legged Kittiwake is eliminated by head and wingtip patterns and by leg color.” The vote on this record was 7-0 - though it was supported by an excellent photograph.

While both of the actual descriptions provided in this paper may seem long, tedious, and bothersome to write, in actuality, they do not take all that long. I am the author of the Mew Gull description (2002-157; see Leukering and Semo 2004); it took me only 15 minutes to complete the entire form. And Mew Gull is one of the more difficult species to sufficiently describe in words! Granted, I had already written notes in my field notebook and I also had pictures to review to help me write the description, but it still took relatively little time. Imagine how quickly you could write a convincing description of an adult male Painted Bunting!

So, if I have any writing skill at all, you now have a better understanding of what the Committee would like to see in rare-bird documentation. Hopefully, you are now going to get into the habit of submitting more, and more thorough, documentations to the Committee. The easiest way to do this is to visit the Colorado Field Ornithologists’ website (www.cfo-link.org) and follow the links to the Colorado Bird Records Committee. Two electronic documentation forms, either one of which you can fill out and submit to the CBRC, are currently on that site; however, very soon, that site will host a state-of-the-art all-electronic submission and review system for rare-bird records. I and the rest of the CBRC hope that you will find this an easy and enjoyable way to contribute your important records to further the state’s ornithological knowledge.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Peter Gent, Nancy Gobris, Rich Leivad, Larry Semo, and Christopher L. Wood for reviewing a previous draft of this manuscript, even if I did not incorporate all of their suggestions. I would also like to thank Rich Miller for allowing me to use his excellent description of the Field Sparrow he saw in Pueblo County in February 2002. I also thank the many contributors to the archive of bird records in the care of the CBRC, even the authors of reports that were not accepted. Those committed birders make up one of the reasons that Colorado ornithology is as advanced, relative to most other states in the country, as it is.

Literature Cited

Leukering, T. and L. S. Semo. 2004. The 37th report of the Colorado Bird Records Committee. *Colorado Birds* 38:73-88.



Lark Sparrow singing along the Devil's Backbone near Loveland in May 2004. Photo by Rachel Hopper.