



NTBC

*Northumberland & Tyneside
Bird Club*

Registered Charity No. 517641

DESCRIPTION WRITING FOR BIRD RECORDS

Description writing – what’s required?

When a rare or scarce bird is found, notes to support the identification will be required for the record to be accepted into the county archive. Many birders seem either unwilling to write descriptions or perhaps (especially for the less experienced) unsure as to what is required for a sighting to be accepted.

The County Records Committee currently has three categories for rare and scarce species and sub-species that are ‘notes species’. These are ‘Category A – or full notes’, ‘Category B – or brief notes’ and ‘Category C for subspecies – or notes appropriate to confirm the identification of the subspecies claimed’.

Category A or full notes:

These should be completed on a club Rare Bird Report Form (available from the County Recorder or as a download from the club web site at www.ntbc.org.uk). It is important that the completed form includes all details requested on the front (including details of the observers experience of not just the species being claimed, but also experience of similar species) and a full description/account on the reverse (with extra pages if necessary). This helps the CRC with a speedy assessment of the sighting.

Category B or brief notes:

These can also be put on a Rare Bird Report Form, or in the Comments column against the appropriate record on the clubs electronic records spreadsheet, or written on the reverse side of a standard club record card. Whichever way you choose, the notes should be detailed enough to eliminate similar species and to confirm without doubt the identity of the species concerned. For example, brief notes on a Pallas’s Warbler should not only be sufficient to identify the species but should also eliminate a similar species like Yellow-browed Warbler.

Category C or notes appropriate to confirm the identification of the subspecies claimed:

Depending on the subspecies being claimed these notes will vary in the amount of detail required to confirm the id of the sub-species. The notes should include all of the features needed to confirm the id.

So – what should be included in a description?

Ideally – as much information as possible for whichever category the description is to be submitted.

Many, if not all, decent field guides have drawings of the topography of a bird and knowledge of the different parts and feather tracts will help you enormously. It is an idea to practice writing a description (‘in the field’) for a common species but only compare it with a field guide after you have finished. In that way you may be able to highlight things you have missed and would look for in future.

The size and shape of the bird is important – is it big or small, sleek or chunky? Does it have a long neck & small head, or have a tapered rear end, etc? It is important to compare the bird with more familiar

species alongside if they are present at the time of observation or from memory if they are not but always state if the latter option is used. For example, if you're describing a wader, is it bigger or smaller than a Dunlin/Redshank, etc?

It is also important to state what family the bird belongs to (and why) e.g. if it is a wader then say why it's a wader – don't assume because you are reporting a Pectoral Sandpiper, the committee will automatically know you are describing a wader!

Write the description systematically. Start with the head, then progress down the neck to the mantle, scapulars, back, rump upper-tail coverts and the tail. Describe any lines (or patterns) along any feather tracts (even if you are not sure of the actual tract of feathers – its better to say 'there were lines down the middle or outside edge of the back'). Describe what colour any of the stripes, etc. are. It is also important to describe the tail well. Is it long/short, is the tail tip rounded/square ended or does it have a fork?

Then proceed to the wings, noting any wing bars, barring etc. It is important in time to learn the feather tracts, as these can be crucial in identifying some species. Next do the underparts, noting any barring or patterning on the breast/flanks/under-tail, etc.

Finally describe the bare parts. These are the bill (size, shape and colour), eye (if noted – including eye-ringing etc) and legs (again size e.g. long or short and colour).

Try to do drawings if possible (you don't need to be Lars Jonsson!). These can be more helpful than written notes sometimes, and it can be easier to show positions of wing bars, various stripes/barring on the body etc.

If the bird is in flight, the wing shape can be important as well as the flight itself. It is well worth remembering that birds fly differently in different wind conditions.

Calls & song: If the bird calls or even sings then try to describe it – this is one of the hardest features to accurately describe in writing but very important sometimes! Is it high pitched or low pitched? Is it one note or several notes, or does it have several syllables if it is one note? Does it go up or down at the beginning, middle or end?

Colours: It is important to describe the colour of each part of the bird. On some feather tracts (i.e. the greater coverts in the upper wing), the centre of the feather can be one colour and the outside edge (i.e. fringe) another while the tip shows a third colour! Colour perception can change with varying light conditions, so it is important to see the bird in different lights, i.e. in shadows – in a bush, or out in the open in full sunlight.

Many birders now take digital photographs of birds, particularly rare or scarce species, and these can be very useful in aiding the assessment process. Sound recordings are also very useful if you make them.

However, there is no substitute for accurate notes taken in the field. Remember, depending on the sighting, it is quite likely that you will not always be able to see or record every field mark and colour and you should write down only what is seen or heard.

Remember, The County Recorder and members of the County Records Committee are always happy to discuss with you what is required for descriptions, etc. and they can be approached at club meetings and in the field.

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