

Guidelines for completing a NSW ORAC rarities submission.

With today's digital technology the best approach to take when considering a submission to a rarities committee is to provide photographic evidence. However, this is not always possible and may require detailed descriptions from one or more observers as corroboration. Certainly, rarities that are seen well by a number of observers are usually accepted. But what if one is alone! A simple paragraph stating that, 'it looked just like the one in the book' will most likely be treated as one that got away and fall into the 'Not Accept' category.

So how should one go about preparing a suitable description?

The majority of reports that get a "Non Accept" decision from the NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee (NSW ORAC) do so because of inadequate descriptions. Many observers are guilty of this and most of it can be put down to inexperience in reporting an unusual bird and inexperience when writing up a description of their sighting.

A key element is that many reports are written from memory; some of them hours, even days, after the sighting. This reduces the reliability and credibility of the report. The importance of carrying a notebook to write down the description of a bird while you are looking at it, or at least immediately afterwards, cannot be stressed enough. Use of a small dictaphone, mobile phone or MP3 player is other alternate methods of recording the details. Species which have only one or two key identification points separating them from similar species will require a much more detailed description than a species where a couple of key features clinches the identity.

When writing the description enter as much detail as possible. As well as those features you are able to see, include notes on those features of the bird you cannot see or did not take in, e.g. "legs and bill covered in mud therefore unable to record the colour"; "bird facing me whilst under observation therefore unable to see the under-tail coverts", etc. When practicable, try to get another experienced observer to observe the bird as soon as possible to confirm the sighting. In every circumstance a photograph of the bird, even a distant one, can be very valuable in confirming identification.

Note carefully that once you have written and submitted your report it is very difficult -from a credibility point of view - to add later changes, so exercise care in recording the details of your submission. The following points are provided for your assistance.

Sequence of Description: Firstly describe the size of the bird. This should be followed by a plumage description generally in the sequence, head and neck, upperparts, tail, upperwing, underparts and underwing followed by the bare parts (bill, eyes, legs and feet). Complete the report by describing aspects of behaviour, feeding habits, interaction and comparison with nearby species and flight pattern when possible.

Size and Jizz: Size is very important and needs to be determined as accurately as possible. It is often hard to judge with a solitary bird so look for any birds nearby for comparison. If none are available try to picture a common bird in your mind to compare it with. When looking at a birds through a telescope the one furthest away always appears larger due to the shallow depth of field of a telescope. In a group of birds make sure the bird you are observing is standing on the same level as the others or it may appear larger or smaller.

'Jizz' is a birding term used to describe the general appearance of a bird, how it stands, flies, feeds and walks. For example, is it elongated, short, squat, broad-winged, long-tailed etc? Many of these aspects can be useful in confirming identification. Note that weather conditions and disturbance can influence a bird's appearance e.g. from being crouched to standing upright and that often sea birds fly differently in high and low winds. Be aware of the effect that the reflection off water can have in making a grey underwing or breasts appear white(r).

Plumage: Become conversant with the different feather tracts and body parts e.g. primaries/secondaries/coverts/tertials and breast/belly/mantle/rump etc. These are featured at the beginning of most handbooks and field guides. Describe these in as much detail as possible as they are important for identification and ageing. Tips for some key areas follow.

Colour: Colour descriptions are affected by the light in which they are seen. An added difficulty is that different people perceive colours differently. Names of colours in descriptions should be kept simple e.g. dark brown rather than burnt umber with a trace of cinnamon. Where two colours are combined the last named colour is the most dominant e.g. buffish yellow is more yellow than buff. Note that light is darker than pale.

Head: With some species, head patterns can be complex and it is important to describe individually the details of crown, forehead, cheeks, ear-coverts, lores, nape, chin, eye-stripes and supercilia. With the eye-stripe note the thickness and length, does it continue onto the lores or to the base of the bill and how far does it extend behind the eye. Similarly with details of the supercilium.

Breast: When the breast colour is different to the belly make sure you state where the transition begins and ends, e.g. lower, upper or mid breast. Is it sharply cut off, irregular or do the colours merge? If streaked, is it dark streaks on a light background or light streaks on a dark background? Is the streaking heavy or light and of the same density across the breast? Does it extend on to the flanks?

Rump and Tail: Rump colour is an important ID point for many species, so ensure you know the difference between rump, upper-tail coverts and back. The rump is often hard to see on a perched bird and patience may be required until the bird either takes flight or these parts can be seen during preening. The same applies for observing the upper-tail coverts, tail, vent, under-tail coverts and flanks.

Wings: Note the length of the wings by observing where they lie in comparison to the end of tail e.g. base, mid tail, tip of tail or beyond. The same applies with the tertials. Sometimes determining the end of the tail from the wing tips is difficult but eventually they will separate and this can be observed. The underwing colour is diagnostic for some species and one must wait until the bird flies or stretches its wings. The median, secondary and greater coverts of the upper-wing are important areas in ageing and identifying birds so include as much detail on them as possible. The same applies to the edges of these feathers. Are they fringed, spotted, tipped; is there a sub terminal band?

Bill: Bill shape and size is often a crucial factor in identification especially with waders. To determine bill length, use the distance from the base of the bill to the front or back of the eye, or the back of the head. Does the bill curve up or down? If so, is the curve along the whole length of the bill or just at the tip? Is the tip blunt, bulbous or fine and is the bill of equal thickness for the whole length? Colour/if bicoloured is it the whole length or just at the base.

Eyes: Note the colour and size along with presence or absence of a complete or partial eye ring.

Legs: Judge the length by using the depth of the body or the length of the bill. Take into consideration that a bird standing in soft mud or water may have longer legs than you think. Record the extent to which the legs/feet/toes project past the end of the tail when the bird is in flight as this can be a crucial point of identification. In some species this projection is slight and difficult to detect. Be aware that if the feet are dangling it may be impossible to ascertain this aspect. Therefore in your report state how the legs are held in flight. Ensure that it is the feet that project and not the central tail feathers.

There are other helpful hints on the Birds Australia Rarities Committee website, you can find these at <http://www.tonypalliser.com/barc/guidance.html>.