

**The Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club**  
**HOW TO COMPLETE THE RARE BIRD REPORT**

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**Date of report and date of sighting:**

These are self-explanatory. I would just point out that it is important that the report should be done as soon as possible after the sighting so that the details are still sharp in your mind.

**Species:**

All that is needed here is the name of the species, usually the common name.

**Number-age-sex:**

How many individual birds? What age? Be as accurate as possible — juvenile, first winter, adult, immature, etc. (note that 'immature' is an imprecise age for many birds, for example, gulls and eagles). What sex? It's not always possible to tell, of course, but determine it if you can. Many birds can only be identified with certainty after their age has been determined.

**Duration of observation (and time of day):**

Record how long you had the bird in view. There is a big difference in the detail you will see in a quick fly-by and a 45-minute study. Give the time of day as well. This is the kind of detail that contributes to the thoroughness of the report.

**Location:**

Again, be as accurate as possible. This is where a GPS unit would be useful, but often a very brief reference to a well-known area might be sufficient (e.g., Britannia Conservation Area — Mud Lake).

**Habitat:**

Be accurate and descriptive. Differentiate between trees and shrubs, marsh and open water, ploughed fields and pasture.

**Weather/lighting:**

The most important point of this section is to give the reviewer a clear idea of the viewing conditions. Was it lit by full sun or silhouetted by back-lighting? Was fog or precipitation a factor?

**Distance to bird:**

It's not always possible to be accurate at longer ranges, but do the best you can. Again, the idea is to show how good a look you were able to get.

**Optical equipment:**

This is important! The degree of magnification makes a big difference. Give the make and model of your binoculars, scope, etc.

**Photographs taken:**

If you were able to get some pictures, attach copies to the report. Photographs have to show enough detail for the bird to be identifiable.

**Discoverer and other observers (as many as possible):**

Get the name, address and telephone number of as many observers as you can. At the same time, encourage them all to complete a report! If you are alone, try to get hold of another birder to confirm the sighting.

**Describe circumstances of observation:**

Give details! Start when you first saw the bird and continue through with the story of your experience to the point when you finished with your observations.

**Previous experience with species:**

Is this the only Northern Wheatear you have ever seen? Have you done a lot of birding in Texas where Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are common? Lack of experience does not mean your record has no value, but it does mean you have to be even more careful with your description to show that you saw what you think you saw. On the other hand, you won't convince anyone with an incomplete report by claiming to have extensive experience with a locally rare species.

**Did you use a field guide? On location? Later? Not at all?**

Don't be too quick to get out the field guide. If you are planning to do a field sketch, do it before you are influenced by the artwork in the field guide. If you do look at a guide, make sure you describe what you saw — not what the guide shows. It is rare to find a bird that looks exactly like the picture in the field guide.

**Description:*****Describe only what was observed in the field!***

The rarer the bird, the more detailed this description will have to be. If there were several birds, note any differences among the individuals when you get to the detailed description. Take notes with the bird in view, if you can. If you wait until later, you will forget details that might turn out to be important.

**Size:** For size, do not give the length in inches or centimetres — very few of us can do that accurately without holding the bird in the hand. In fact, birds in the hand rarely look the same

size that they do in the field. Compare the bird to something nearby or with something you know very well. Was the shorebird bigger or smaller than the Lesser Yellowlegs with which it associated? Was the songbird larger or smaller than a robin?

**Shape:** This should include the overall impression — long and thin, short and squat, as well as details such as length of the neck, posture, etc. Again, it is a good idea to compare the bird to another species nearby.

**Colour patterns:** When describing the plumage, be systematic in your approach — for example, you can start at the head, then move to the upperparts, wings, tail and underparts. Describe every major feather group, especially if there is variation in colour. It is helpful to learn the technical terms used to describe the topography of a bird, but do the best you can. If you see the bird in flight, describe the wing pattern from above and below, if possible. Don't forget the beak and legs. The description of the beak should be as detailed as possible, including shape, colour and length. Some birds, like many warblers, have strong patterns that are easily described, while cryptically coloured birds, like shorebirds, may require much more attention to detail.

**Song:** Songs can be difficult to describe, but it helps if you can make a reference to a song you know well. To give an example that most birders know, you could describe a Scarlet Tanager's song as being like that of a Robin, but hoarser, or you could describe a Yellow-throated Vireo as being like a Scarlet Tanager's, but slower and more widely spaced.

**Call notes:** Differentiate between songs and calls if you hear both. The Gray Catbird's "mew" call is well known, even to non-birders, but the song is much more complicated.

**Behaviour:** Give as much detail as you can. How did the bird feed? How did it fly? Did it sit on a wire or skulk in the shrubbery? Did it bob up and down or wag its tail? Some birds can be spotted, or even identified, by their behaviour. Jaegers will often be seen harassing gulls or terns. Phoebes pump their tails.

**Other diagnostic characteristics:**

**Sketches:** Don't be afraid to do a sketch! No one is looking for a Rembrandt here. All that is necessary is to show the basic shape and pattern of the bird. Use arrows and point-form notes. Write down anything that looks like it might be important. Draw the shape of the bird as accurately as possible, but if all your drawings of birds have the same shape, don't worry about it. Show the differences by showing the patterns. Draw the shape of the beak as accurately as possible. What is really important is that the field sketch is not an attempt to draw the illustration in a field guide. No doubt the paintings in the guide are better art than anything you or I can produce, but you want to show your bird. I must admit that I rarely have paper and pencil with me in the field when I spot a rare bird, but I always do at least a quick sketch and write down some notes before I look in the guide, usually when I get back to the car. If you look at the guide first it will be impossible to completely eliminate the influence of the image in the book from your sketch, particularly if the bird is no longer in view. Resist the tendency to fill in the details you "should have" seen. It is a good idea to practice doing some sketches on commoner birds before you have to deal with a rarity report that will be shown to others. If common birds don't

motivate you enough, do a sketch with notes of any lifers you see, even if they don't qualify as rare birds.

**Similar species/ how eliminated:**

You have to show that you considered other possibilities, particularly similar common species. This is where you can explain how you eliminated the possibility of Horned Grebe when you identified an Eared Grebe. Don't forget to mention other rarer species that resemble your bird. How did you choose between Scissor-tailed and Fork-tailed Flycatchers? List any marks that you used to decide on your identification, as well as those you checked for but did not see.

Give your name and complete address and sign and date the report. Send the completed form to the OFNC Bird Records Subcommittee.

All Rare Bird Reports are evaluated by the members of the Bird Records Subcommittee of the OFNC. They will rule the report as acceptable or unacceptable. Acceptable records of provincially rare species will be passed on to the Ontario Bird Records Committee for their review. This decision is based on whether your description of your sighting gives enough information to convince the committee that your identification is correct. If your report is not accepted, please do not be offended. This does not mean that anyone is casting doubts on your honesty. You just haven't provided sufficient detail to unequivocally identify the species — either because you couldn't see it or didn't record it. Be motivated to do a better job next time, both in the field and in writing your report. If you can supply more data, do so — you can always re-submit a report if you have additional information available. If, by the time you have completed the report, you have any doubts about your identification, you probably won't convince the committee. Sometimes it is hard to admit that our look at a potential rarity just wasn't good enough!

Every responsible birder has the opportunity and the responsibility to contribute to our knowledge of birds. We encourage you to do your part by submitting documentation of your rare birds.