

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE DATA

ROBERT W. DICKERMAN

Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, N.M. 87131

The contribution of salvaged material to scientific collections is great. We have too much of a tendency to emphasize rarities, thus we make great ado about the first Red-shouldered Hawk (Buteo lineatus) specimen or one of the few Philadelphia Vireo (Vireo philadelphicus) specimens from the State obtained from salvaged birds. However, in reality, the most important contribution of salvaged material is in the augmentation of series of common species.

As an example, in 1989 there were about 20 specimens of Great Horned Owl (Bubo virginianus) in the Museum of Southwestern Biology from the southwest. Today there are over 100 from New Mexico, nearly a third from the nesting season. Possibly only California is represented by a greater number of specimens. It would have been both difficult and unconscionable to have assembled this series through collecting. And it is only now with this magnificent collection that we are better able to delineate the populations nesting and wintering in New Mexico. But during this same time period numerous other Great Horned Owls were not saved, many of those because of lack of data!

A brilliant red Maserati without a motor might be beautiful, but functionally it would be useless. A specimen of a brilliant red tanager without full data also would be beautiful, but it could add little to our knowledge and scientifically would be without value.

In 1990, when I first began to deal with "salvaged" birds from New Mexico, less than 50% were accompanied with any form of information. As of early 1994, 80% or more are accompanied by some form of "data." From a few rehabilitators, 100% of the birds are accompanied by full data. But that 100% of all salvaged birds are not accompanied by complete, reliable data is unforgivable.

DATA. What are they? With a specimen, they are the information that tells us, and future generations of investigators, when, where, and by whom the bird (animal) was collected or salvaged. They allow the evaluation of credibility, the evaluation of that which is valid, i.e. a trustworthy record. Less than that would be the Maserati without a motor.

IDENTIFICATION. This is of slight importance, as the bird itself is identifiable. If the specimen is saved, within the next 100 years someone will correctly identify it, but it will not be saved if it does not have full data.

LOCALITY. It is the exact place where a bird was found that is vital. It is not the address of the person that found the bird, nor the regional office of an agency such as Carlsbad, Tucumcari or Farmington where the bird was deposited. Incidentally, the exact location where the bird was originally found, should as-nearly-as-feasible be the release site if the bird survives! The locality should be specific and as detailed as possible. "Guadalupe" New Mexico is not acceptable as there are Guadalupes in at least three counties. The same is true of many often-used names (such as San Mateo or Rock Creek) that occur throughout the southwest or Mexico. Always specify exactly to which Guadalupe or Rock Creek you are referring. An example, a Great Horned Owl from a specific locality in the Guadalupe

Mountains would be of critical importance, especially if accompanied with elevation or a note on habitat. One from the "Carlsbad area" is of little importance. Some individuals make short to long range migrations. Thus winter birds can illuminate migrations, though say nothing about our local nesting populations. Both of these seasonal groups of birds are important to understand, hence accurate and specific locality data are critical.

When the western USA was surveyed, a unique coordinate system was developed. The land was gridded in square-mile blocks, and these were combined into 36 square-mile townships. This "Range and Township" system was highly useful in the past, however today, with world-wide latitude/longitude coordinates increasingly used and now instantly available from satellites, the system is nearly obsolete and when possible should be avoided. Furthermore, a specimen with only range and township data would be difficult to use in a museum where appropriate maps might not be available.

Never use a locality name, such as "Roer's Bird Farm," that is not found on a readily available map. Especially valuable are names on standard road maps or towns with post offices. Use miles, or kilometers, from the nearest known locality, combined with a cardinal direction. This may be either __ miles southwest of Flatlands, or, __ miles south, __ miles west of Flatlands.

DATE. The format of 6/9/93 is confusing because the first two numbers can be either month or day. Europeans do not use the American convention of month first (and we are not always consistent). In some cases the specimen might well resolve the issue by the condition of its plumage or gonads, but that would probably not be the case if the date were 4/5/93 (and if the bird were a migrant, the date might be very important indeed). Distinguishing month from day and fully specifying the year (6 Sept 1993) solves the problem. Remember, we now regularly see overlapping of the centuries. There are, in the MSB collection, a considerable number of birds collected over a century ago; thus '93 or even '75 could be ambiguous.

SOURCE. When possible the name of the person responsible for the locality and date information should be recorded. In some cases additional information might be needed, and the person who made an effort to salvage the bird should be recognized. NEVER use initials if the full name is known. K.J. Smith might be Kathleen or Kenneth. Kathleen J. Smith might be found in a telephone directory, while K.J. Smith might not. There are 31 Johnson(s) in the membership directory of the four major ornithological societies; how many Sanchez(s) are there in the Albuquerque phone book? Never use nicknames. We recently catalogued birds collected or prepared by a person whose name is/was (I believe) Arnold Edward Lupe. On various labels the name was recorded as Arnold E. Lupe, E. Lupe, Eddy Lupe, and even Ed. Lupe. A full name has a purpose in scientific documentation.

Remember, taking a few seconds to record data properly might make the difference between a dead bird becoming an information source for generations to come, or a discard. It is in your hands.