

## **Recommendations for Reliable Reporting of Flagged Species (Especially on proper use of Merlin Sound Identification)**

As most of you are aware, Joe Hanfman, Russ Ruffing, and Jo Solem collaborate with eBird reviewers to maintain accurate and up-to-date Howard County bird records. This is not an easy task; unfortunately, it is becoming more difficult with each passing season. Why? **Because woefully few birders bother to provide good field notes for unusual sightings or for species easily misidentified, especially for those records not accompanied by photos or recordings.**

Decades from now, you are unlikely to be remembered by new generations of birders or, more importantly, by researchers. Your publicly available records (i.e., eBird records in most cases) will be all that supports the species you claimed. How you document your Cackling Goose, white goose, swan, scaup, yellowlegs, flycatcher, American Tree Sparrow, etc., or out-of-season birds like winter thrashers and catbirds will be the only way to judge the accuracy of your observations.

Birding has changed dramatically since sightings depended almost entirely on written records. Digital photography and phone recordings verify a substantial number of records. **A caution about electronic tools and references, however. They can be marvelous, but they can also provide a false sense of security.** Merlin, for example, makes mistakes, and few references – either web-based or print – fully disclose how difficult certain identifications are, which impacts whether they should be made at all. There are some birds like chickadees that should not be identified by sound alone, since chickadees learn their songs.

Even if eBird doesn't flag certain species, good field notes are essential for Howard County because it is a small geographic area and often registers just a few sightings of a species in a season. For instance, out of a dozen county Philadelphia Vireo reports in a given fall season, if four have no details and might be mistaken identifications, that is a substantial percentage of possible errors.

**Please carefully examine each bird you add to a list no matter who reported it, and document any which could easily be misidentified, especially if you are unable to add photos.** If uncertain of an identity, take time to do research or ask another birder for advice. If you have any uncertainty, it is best to leave it off your list altogether. Do not guess! Every bird cannot always be identified as distance, atmospheric conditions, angle, light, your optics, experience, listing bias, and more can all impact how accurately you identify a bird.

If you see the same unusual species multiple times, is it necessary to repeat the same notes? No, not if the bird is in the same general area. Under those circumstance, refer to your original sighting; however, if it is the same species but in a different location, field notes *are* necessary. A few short phrases may be sufficient. Sometimes mentioning what you couldn't see and why may be just as valuable as those aspects you observed.

**One final request. Please do not take offense if you are asked for additional details for any record.**

Such a request or even a suggestion of an alternative ID is simply part of our effort to maintain accurate records. It is not a slight to you as a birder. Learning from each other is one of the advantages of being part of a community of birders. All of us make mistakes. Remember the old adage, "A beginning birder has misidentified hundreds of birds; an experienced birder has misidentified thousands!"

Our thanks to those birders who take a careful and extremely conservative attitude toward identification of the easily misidentified species. Only with concerted effort and by continuing to work together will we be able to maintain Howard County's bird records as a model of accuracy.

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