

Editorial note

Fraud in Ornithology

An excellent article entitled "*What the eye doesn't see: the prevalence of fraud in ornithology*" by Andrew H.J. Harrop, J. Martin Collinson and Tim Melling, appeared in *British Birds* Vol. 105 pp.236-257 (May 2012).

Its abstract reads: "*There is a tendency to see examples of fraud in ornithology as rare aberrations. This paper outlines some known and suspected historical examples of fraud, and argues that fraud of one kind or another has occurred more or less consistently, if uncommonly, in ornithology. Although most of the examples discussed are from Britain, it is likely that similar examples could be found in the archives of many nations. It is also highly likely that small-scale fraud continues today and is something that the ornithological community should be aware of. In particular, this has implications for the level of proof required by those assessing records of rarities.*"

The authors outline some of their reasons "*for believing that the scale of the problem has perhaps been underestimated or (latterly) even denied*" and emphasize that "*there is evidence to suggest that fraud continues to the present day, and that the lessons should not be forgotten.*"

They then write on "*The psychology of fraud – motivation and opportunity*". Amongst various motives, which in some cases have been financial, the authors state categorically that probably the most common motivation for fraud, particularly where the sighting and reporting of rarities are concerned, "*is the desire for recognition among peers or rivals*". They add that "*Photographs alone are no longer considered proof in the birding community, since they can be manipulated and their associated EXIF data (embedded details about equipment used and date/time of image capture) tampered with. Sometimes fraud may be fuelled by rivalry, such that sightings are embellished or even fabricated to compete with rivals' sightings.*"

The authors write at length about "*Pranks, hoaxes and fraud*"; "*Fraud in early natural history*"; "*The Hasting rarities*"; "*Taxidermy*"; and "*Scientific fraud*" amongst several other topics. Under the topic "*Modern field ornithology*" the authors state that in the light of what birders know about the history of fraud one would think "*that modern field ornithology should be relatively free from it. The evidence, however, suggests that the conclusion would be premature.*"

Under the topic "*Manipulation of descriptions*" the authors write: "*In the most extreme cases, this may involve the complete fabrication of a rarity record, with submission of a description based on field-guide accounts*" and may also involve the embellishment of descriptions with "*the inclusion of photographs taken elsewhere, to 'corroborate' the sighting*". They also give various several examples of fraud by some birders and state that "*Fraud using photographs is perhaps the easiest to attempt*" adding that "*EXIF data are a key component of the validation of rarity photographs but can be modified using freely available software.*" They also stated that "*It seems that taking digital images abroad then claiming that they were taken in Britain is becoming the modern equivalent of importing specimens then claiming that they were obtained in Britain - a twenty-first century incarnation of 'what's hit is history.'*"

In our view, the latter quotation is a fine example of what has happened, and is still happening here, with the frequent underhand illegal importation of many dead carcasses or skins of birds from various countries and then claimed to have been recorded in Malta. Some have also appeared in print. In some cases we seem to be going back, and in some instances dishonestly, to those days when a mounted bird in a private collection represents unquestionable proof.