

The Roles of the Nature Society (Singapore) Records Committee

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Introduction

Birdwatching is a very popular pastime with people from all walks of life all over the world. All you need is a pair of binoculars, a pen and a notebook, and you are ready to embark on a life-long hobby wherever you are on this planet. It may take some time, years even, but soon, the dedicated birdwatcher will come across what is classified as a rarity, a species deemed by the local experts, usually the Records Committee, as worthy of detailed documentation. Sometimes, the bird is one that has not yet been recorded for the country, usually referred to as a new species, even though it is not new to Science. It is simply the first time that it has been seen in that country. What happens then? How does a birdwatcher document his or her sighting? Where does he or she send the documentation to? How are records of rarities or new species evaluated? What does a Records Committee do? Who are these people? This paper addresses all these questions from the perspective of a committee that has been playing the role of the national records committee in Singapore for over two decades. This is the Nature Society (Singapore) Bird Group Records Committee or NSSBGRC.

What is a Record?

So, what is a record anyway? A record may be defined as a documentation of an identification made by a birdwatcher based on his personal experience of any bird and written down in his notebook as X species. There may or may not be accompanying description or annotation. Most of the time, there are no further details other than the bird's name. This is usually the case for common birds. Sometimes, there are details of numbers encountered, its behaviour, the number of males or females and any of the innumerable details that birdwatchers append to their list of species encountered in any birdwatching trip.

Sometimes, the birdwatcher encounters something really special. A rarity, or maybe, even a first record for the country! A rarity is defined a bird that has been recorded in the country no more than ten times in the last fifty years (Lim 2007). It may also include less commonly occurring species that closely resemble commoner species. An example is the Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes*. It is an uncommon winter visitor in Singapore and very difficult to separate from the commoner Pacific Reef Heron *E. sacra* and Little Egret *E. garzetta*, especially when in winter plumage. Therefore, it is also classified as a rarity (Lim 2007). A full list of the officially designated rarities is attached as Appendix 1.

So, what do you do if you encounter a rarity? The first thing to do is to try and document as fully as possible a description of the bird and also additional information about the habitat and your prior experience with the species. In particular, the following data should be obtained:

Name and contact of observer(s)

Do include your full name and contact details (especially handphone and email) and those of your companions, if any. Try to get them to submit their notes as well. They may find details that you have missed.

Site location

Please provide exact location including geographical coordinates and the nearest road names, so that follow up visits can be arranged by the Records Committee.

Habitat

Provide a description of the habitat that the rarity was seen in. It would be useful to take a photograph of the habitat.

Date and time

Take note of the date and the time during which the rarity was seen. Include the duration of observation.

Weather

For rare migrants, weather plays a part in their occurrence. Therefore, try to include as much details as possible, such as wind direction, whether there was wet weather the previous night, and even things like regional haze conditions

Tide conditions

Record the tide, e.g. high, low, incoming, outgoing. Hourly tidal readings may be obtained from the internet.

Lighting conditions

Record the lighting conditions. Was the sky overcast, cloudy or fair? Was the sun in your eyes or on your back?

Equipment used

Record the equipment used in making the observations. Include details of brand, magnification and objective lens diameter.

Distance from observer(s)

Provide an estimate of the distance between the bird and you, including the closest distance.

Describe the bird

Provide as complete a description of the bird as possible, taking note of the following main areas:

- Size and general shape
- At rest
- In flight
- In the hand
- Call/song
- Behaviour

Any additional evidence of the sighting that would help offer additional insight would be most useful. They include:

- Sketches
- Photographs
- Video
- Digital photo

Alternatively, observers may download the official Records Submission form available from the NSS Bird Group website.

Before looking at the procedure for submitting notes, let's examine the roles of the NSSBGRC.

Roles of the Nature Society (Singapore) Bird Group Records Committee

The roles of the NSSBGRC are:

1. To review new and rare (ten records or less) records for updates in the latest official checklist.

2. To verify all records of new or rare (ten records or less) bird records at the reported site where possible.
3. To review and verify status changes of birds. The Records Committee shall suggest, where applicable, projects to the Nature Society (Singapore) Bird Group Committee which may yield new or rare records or uncover new information on status and distribution of birds.
4. To publish an updated checklist at regular intervals.
5. To publish a fully up-to-date and annotated checklist and revise that at regular intervals.
6. To publish an up-to-date Rarities List (Appendix 1).
7. To publish a Guidelines for Submission of Records.
8. To publish a list of accepted and rejected records yearly in *Singapore Avifauna*, the Bird Group's official newsletter, the Bird Group's official website, <http://www.wildbirdsingapore.nss.org> and any other relevant publications
9. To deposit all records and meeting minutes in a central file or database to be stored in the NSSBG Library/Database.
10. To hold meeting on a regular (quarterly to at least twice yearly) basis for the purpose of achieving any of the above objectives.

Evaluation of Records

The following are the steps undertaken by NSSBGRC once a record of a rarity or new species is received:

1. The committee shall be informed of the record within twenty four (24) hours and a full written description with objective evidence (sketches, photographs or video), if available, to reach the Chairperson not later than fourteen (14) days after the observation was made.
2. Upon receipt of news of the potential new/rare record, the Chairperson shall activate the Committee for an on-site visit in an attempt to verify the record. All observers are encouraged to use the official Records Submission form obtainable from the NSS Bird Group website.
3. Upon receipt of the record, the Chairperson shall distribute it to the Committee within seven (7) days. The Committee will be informed before the record is sent. Alternatively, an email notification can also be made. If the record is still not received after seven (7) days have elapsed, the member shall inform the Chairperson so that a replacement set can be made.
4. All records must reach the Committee at least fourteen (14) days before a Meeting is convened. Records that fail to meet this deadline will be discussed at the next scheduled Meeting.
5. The Chairperson shall inform the Committee of the Meeting in writing (letter, fax or email) at least fourteen (14) days before the date.
6. The Committee shall review all submissions and come to a decision based on their own field experience and references before a Meeting.
7. At the Meeting, Committee Members will be given the designated form to fill in their votes and comments, if any, and submit them to the Chairperson, who shall add up all the votes and declare the status of each submitted record.
8. In the event of a tie, the record will be kept in view (KIVed) until an opinion is sought from the advisors and/or a known authority. A Meeting will then be

- convened to discuss the record. A re-vote will be conducted and if there is still a tie, the submission will be kept in view until the next record or news is received.
9. A submission is accepted through a simple majority of votes and is rejected if the majority is not obtained. After acceptance, there will be a discussion of not more than ten (10) minutes on its status (Appendix 2), i.e. Category A or E, followed by a vote. The decision of the Committee is final.
 10. The Chairperson shall publish the results in *Singapore Avifauna* or any related NSSBG publication. The Chairperson will also inform the observer of the results of the Committee's deliberation, within 90 days.



Table 1: Records Committee Process Flow

Composition of NSSBGRC

Since its formation in 1988, the NSSBGRC has seen its committee change in composition as it strives to include an optimum number of suitably qualified people in its committee and replace those who have departed on their own accord.

Its original members were Dr Clive Briffett, Dr Ho Hua Chew, Lim Kim Chuah, Lim Kim Keang, Lim Kim Seng and R. Subaraj. They took on the groundwork laid by Dr Christopher Hails who left Singapore in 1988.

R. Subaraj left the committee in 1994 and was replaced by Alfred Chia and Alan Owyong. In 2007, Clive Briffett departed for the UK and he was replaced by Kenneth Kee and Yong Ding Li. In 2010, Dr Ho Hua Chew left the committee and was replaced by Prof Ng Soon Chye.

The current committee has eight members and has between its members over 200 years of field experience in Singapore and the Oriental region.

In addition to the committee members, NSSBGRC actively seeks the advice of people from outside the committee when it comes to challenging identification issues, such as the *Collocalia* swiftlets and *Gallinago* snipes. It has an advisory panel of experts from around the world including Dave Bakewell, an expert on shorebirds, Dr Nigel Collar, an authority on Asian bird taxonomy, Dr Phil Round, a world authority on Thai birds, and Dr David Wells, a world authority on Malaysian birds. The other members are Mike Chong, an expert on Malaysian birds, Dr Chaiyan Kasorndorkbua, Peter Kennerley, an expert on warblers and buntings, and Uthai Treesucon, an expert on Thai birds. Bakewell and Round are also the current chairs of the Records Committees of Thailand and Malaysia respectively and provide constant and valuable inputs on the workings of records committees elsewhere in the region.

Achievements

NSSBGRC has consistently reviewed records since its first tentative formation in 1984, when the first checklist of the birds of Singapore, was published (Briffett 1984). It listed 284 species. This was the first list of birds since C.A. Gibson-Hill issued his revised list of birds in 1950 (Gibson-Hill 1950). Records evaluation had in the intervening years (1960-1983) been handled through a regional coordinator in David Wells, who was then based in the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. When Christopher Hails was posted to Singapore in 1983, he took the position of unofficial recorder for the Singapore territory and he undertook this role till 1988 when he left Singapore. It was in 1988 that the review of records became a task done by a committee, as opposed to one person, based entirely in Singapore. David Wells remained the regional recorder until he retired to the U.K. in 2000.

Since 1988, NSSBGRC has been active in maintaining a national checklist of birds and also in adding to information on the study of wild birds within the Republic of Singapore. It has since published three updated checklists in 1991, 1999 and 2007 (Lim 1991, 1999 and 2007). The checklists had evolved from a simple card to a booklet with bird names in three languages and the list of birds grew from 284 to 364 species. NSSBGRC has also issued an avifaunal list summarising status, distribution and history of all birds ever recorded in Singapore in 2009 (Lim 2009).

In addition to the publications listed above, NSSBGRC has also been active in publicising its roles and also keeping observers and birdwatchers alike informed on its work with periodic updates (Lim 1990, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2003, 2008). First sighting reports, once authenticated, have also been published in the relevant publications (Cockayne 2008, Kee 1994, Kennerley 1998, Lamont 1998, Lim 1989)

NSSBGRC has also consistently kept up with the latest changes in bird taxonomy. Its checklist in 1999 was the first in the region to adopt Sibley's Sequence, which used DNA-DNA hybridization studies to determine the relationship between birds. It continues to keep abreast of taxonomic changes through its members and advisory panel.

Conclusion

NSSBGRC has consistently adopted and is constantly reviewing best practices from around the world in operating a committee that objectively reviews records of rarities and new species for the purposes of publishing an accurate and up-to-date national bird checklist, and informing observers and birdwatchers of the latest updates. It has recruited experienced people who can contribute to the process of records authentication to sit in its committee, maintained a transparent and democratic process of voting on records and also actively seek the advice of taxonomists, academics, conservationists and ornithologists in areas where the committee may lack expertise. It has worked very successfully with the NSS Bird Group Editorial Committee, which publishes *Singapore Avifauna*, to keep readers informed and updated on the rare and unusual wild birds occurring in Singapore.

NSSBGRC will continue to actively seek records of rarities and new species from every bird observer in Singapore, although it has to be stated that not everyone is willing to share their records or recognises the importance of their records. Nevertheless, NSSBGRC continues to reach out to all birdwatchers in Singapore so that a more complete and accurate picture of the avifauna of Singapore can be obtained for the benefit of all interested persons and organisations and for the ultimate objective of conserving wild birds.

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Appendix 1: List of Rarities (Lim 2007)

NUMBER	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	ABUNDANCE/STATUS
1	EURASIAN WIGEON	<i>Anas Penelope</i>	R/A
2	GADWALL	<i>Anas strepera</i>	R/A
3	EURASIAN TEAL	<i>Anas crecca</i>	R/WV
4	NORTHERN PINTAIL	<i>Anas acuta</i>	R/WV
5	NORTHERN SHOVELER	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	R/WV
6	TUFTED DUCK	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	R/A
7	GREAT SLATY WOODPECKER	<i>Mulleripicus pulverulentus</i>	R/NBV
8	LARGE HAWK-CUCKOO	<i>Hierococcyx sparverioides</i>	R/WV PM
9	MALAYSIAN HAWK-CUCKOO	<i>Hierococcyx fugax</i>	U/NBV
10	HODGSON'S HAWK-CUCKOO	<i>Hierococcyx nisicolor</i>	R/WV
11	ORIENTAL CUCKOO	<i>Cuculus saturates</i>	R/PM
12	HORSFIELD'S BRONZE CUCKOO	<i>Chrysococcyx basalis</i>	R/WV
13	GLOSSY SWIFTLET ##	<i>Collocalia esculenta</i>	R/R(B)
14	SILVER-RUMPED SPINETAIL	<i>Rhaphidura leucopygialis</i>	R/NBV
15	WHISKERED TREESWIFT	<i>Hemiprocne comate</i>	R/NBV
16	ORIENTAL SCOPS OWL	<i>Otus sunia</i>	R/WV PM
17	SHORT-EARED OWL	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	R/WV PM
18	GREY NIGHTJAR	<i>Caprimulgus indicus</i>	R/WV PM
19	CINNAMON-HEADED GREEN PIGEON *	<i>Treron fulvicollis</i>	R/NBV
20	GREEN IMPERIAL PIGEON	<i>Ducula aenea</i>	R/NBV
21	MASKED FINFOOT **	<i>Heliopais personata</i>	R/A
22	SLATY-LEGGED CRAKE	<i>Rallina eurizonoides</i>	R/WV PM
23	EURASIAN COOT	<i>Fulica atra</i>	R/A
24	EURASIAN WOODCOCK	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	R/WV
25	SWINHOE'S SNIPE	<i>Gallinago megala</i>	R/WV
26	LITTLE CURLEW	<i>Numenius minutus</i>	R/A
27	FAR EASTERN CURLEW *	<i>Numenius madagascariensis</i>	R/PM
28	SPOTTED REDSHANK	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	R/WV
29	NORDMANN'S GREENSHANK **	<i>Tringa guttifer</i>	R/WV
30	GREEN SANDPIPER	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	R/WV
31	RED KNOT	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	R/WV
32	TEMMINCK'S STINT	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>	R/PM
33	PECTORAL SANDPIPER	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>	R/A
34	SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER	<i>Calidris acuminata</i>	R/A
35	DUNLIN	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	R/PM
36	SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER **	<i>Eurynorhynchus pymeus</i>	R/WV
37	RED-NECKED PHALAROPE	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	R/WV
38	BEACH STONE-CURLEW ##*	<i>Burhinus giganteus</i>	R/R (B)
39	ORIENTAL PLOVER	<i>Charadrius veredus</i>	R/PM
40	GREY-HEADED LAPWING	<i>Vanellus cinereus</i>	R/A
41	SMALL PRATINCOLE	<i>Glareola lactea</i>	R/PM
42	PARASITIC JAEGER	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	R/A
43	BROWN-HEADED GULL	<i>Larus brunnicephalus</i>	R/A
44	CASPIAN TERN	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	R/WV
45	ROSEATE TERN	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	R/A
46	ALEUTIAN TERN	<i>Sterna aleutica</i>	R/A
47	WHISKERED TERN	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	R/WV PM
48	JERDON'S BAZA	<i>Aviceda jerdoni</i>	R/A
49	BAT HAWK	<i>Macheiramphus alcinus</i>	R/NBV
50	HIMALAYAN VULTURE	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>	R/A
51	SHORT-TOED SNAKE EAGLE	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	R/PM

52	WESTERN MARSH HARRIER	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	R/A
53	NORTHERN HARRIER	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	R/WV
54	PIED HARRIER	<i>Circus melanoleucos</i>	R/WV
55	BESRA	<i>Accipiter virgatus</i>	R/PM
56	STEPPE EAGLE	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	R/A
57	ASIAN IMPERIAL EAGLE **	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	R/A
58	BOOTED EAGLE	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	R/A
59	RUFOUS-BELLIED EAGLE	<i>Hieraetus kienerii</i>	R/WV
60	BLYTH'S HAWK-EAGLE	<i>Spizaetus alboniger</i>	R/NBV
61	BLACK-THIGHED FALCONET ##	<i>Microhierax fringillarius</i>	R/R(B)
62	LESSER KESTREL **	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	R/A
63	EURASIAN HOBBY	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	R/A
64	ORIENTAL HOBBY	<i>Falco severus</i>	R/A
65	CHINESE EGRET **	<i>Egretta eulophotes</i>	R/WV
66	JAVAN POND HERON	<i>Ardeola speciosa</i>	R/A
67	MALAYAN NIGHT HERON	<i>Gorsachius melanolophus</i>	R/WV PM
68	GLOSSY IBIS	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	R/A
69	LESSER FRIGATEBIRD	<i>Fregata ariel</i>	R/NBV
70	CHRISTMAS FRIGATEBIRD **	<i>Fregata andrewsi</i>	R/NBV
71	MANGROVE PITTA ##*	<i>Pitta megarhyncha</i>	R/RB
72	BLACK-AND-RED BROADBILL	<i>Cymbirhynchus macrorhynchos</i>	R/NBV
73	LESSER CUCKOOSHRIKE ##	<i>Coracina fimbriata</i>	R/R(B)
74	ASHY DRONGO	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>	R/WV
75	BLACK-NAPED MONARCH ##	<i>Hypothymis azurea</i>	R/R(B)
76	JAPANESE PARADISE FLYCATCHER *	<i>Terpsiphone atrocauda</i>	R/PM
77	WHITE-THROATED ROCK THRUSH	<i>Monticola gularis</i>	R/WV PM
78	BLUE ROCK THRUSH	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	R/PM
79	SIBERIAN THRUSH	<i>Zoothera sibirica</i>	R/PM
80	BROWN-CHESTED JUNGLE FLYCATCHER **	<i>Rhinomyias brunneata</i>	R/WV PM
81	GREY-STREAKED FLYCATCHER	<i>Muscicapa griseisticta</i>	R/A
82	BROWN-STREAKED FLYCATCHER	<i>Muscicapa williamsoni</i>	R/WV
83	CHINESE FLYCATCHER	<i>Ficedula elisae</i>	R/WV PM
84	BLUE-AND-WHITE FLYCATCHER	<i>Cyanoptila cyanomelana</i>	R/PM
85	CHINESE BLUE FLYCATCHER	<i>Cyornis glaucicomans</i>	R/A
86	MANGROVE BLUE-FLYCATCHER ##	<i>Cyornis rufigastra</i>	R/RB
87	CHESTNUT-CHEEKED STARLING	<i>Stumus philippensis</i>	R/A
88	ROSY STARLING	<i>Stumus roseus</i>	R/A
89	ASIAN HOUSE MARTIN	<i>Delichon dasypus</i>	U/PM
90	BUFF-VENTED BULBUL ##*	<i>Iole olivacea</i>	R/R(B)
91	STREAKED BULBUL *	<i>Ixos malaccensis</i>	R/NBV
92	LANCEOLATED WARBLER	<i>Locustella lanceolata</i>	R/WV PM
93	DUSKY WARBLER	<i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>	R/PM
94	YELLOW-BROWED WARBLER	<i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i>	R/PM WV
95	MOUSTACHED BABBLER ##	<i>Malacopteron magnirostre</i>	R/RB
96	THICK-BILLED FLOWERPECKER	<i>Dicaeum agile</i>	R/NBV
97	YELLOW-VENTED FLOWERPECKER ##	<i>Dicaeum chrysorrheum</i>	R/R(B)
98	PLAIN SUNBIRD ##	<i>Anthreptes simplex</i>	R/R(B)
99	THICK-BILLED SPIDERHUNTER ##	<i>Arachnothera crassirostris</i>	R/R(B)
100	YELLOW-EARED SPIDERHUNTER ##	<i>Arachnothera chrysoxygenys</i>	R/R(B)
101	WHITE WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	R/WV
102	CITRINE WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	R/WV
103	WHITE-RUMPED MUNIA ##	<i>Lonchura striata</i>	R/RB
104	YELLOW-BREADED BUNTING	<i>Emberiza aureola</i>	R/WV

Appendix 2: Categories of Wild Birds Used By NSSBGRC (Lim 2009)

- A SPECIES WHICH HAVE BEEN RECORDED IN AN APPARENTLY WILD STATE IN THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

- B SPECIES WHICH HAVE BEEN RECORDED IN AN APPARENTLY WILD STATE IN THE LAST FIFTY YEARS BUT NOT IN THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

- C SPECIES WHICH ALTHOUGH ORIGINALLY INTRODUCED BY HUMANS HAVE NOW ESTABLISHED REGULAR POPULATIONS WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT BE SELF-SUSTAINING

- D SPECIES WHICH HAVE OCCURRED IN AN APPARENTLY WILD STATE BUT FOR WHICH THE POSSIBILITY OF ESCAPE OR RELEASE CANNOT BE STAISFACTORILY EXCLUDED

- E SPECIES FOR WHICH ALL PUBLISHED RECORDS ARE SUSPECTED OF BEING BIRDS WHICH HAVE ESCAPED OR HAVE BEEN RELEASED FROM CAPTIVITY

- F SPECIES FOR WHICH ALL PUBLISHED RECORDS MUST BE REGARDED AS DOUBTFUL BECAUSE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF MISIDENTIFICATION OR INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION