

REPORT OF THE RAOU RECORD APPRAISAL COMMITTEE

The Record Appraisal Committee was established by the RAOU Council on 10 July 1975. Its function is to appraise records of birds submitted to it by the Council through the RAOU Secretary or through the Editor of *Emu*. At present the Committee is called upon to appraise records on the evidence of sight descriptions, sketches and specimens; tape recordings or sound spectrographs or some other kind of evidence could be also submitted.

Terms of Reference

The Record Appraisal Committee consists of a Convener/Secretary and four other members: Mr J. N. Hobbs (NSW), Mr A. R. McEvey (Convener/Secretary, Vic.), Mr A. R. McGill (NSW), Mr G. M. Pizze (Vic.), and Mr I. Rowley (WA). All are appointed by Council for up to five years and all may be eligible for re-appointment. The Committee is responsible solely to Council and its basic function is to accept or not accept records of birds submitted to it. All discussion that takes place within the Committee concerning any submission is strictly confidential and must not be divulged except to the President of the RAOU alone and only upon request by the President. The Convener/Secretary is required to maintain a permanent record of all submissions and decisions for the archives of the RAOU.

In aim and primary function the RAC and its decisions are not concerned with or connected with the Checklist of the birds of Australia even though a particular submission may have been initiated by the Checklist Amendment Committee or the Checklist compiler and the resulting decision used for the purpose of the Checklist.

The decisions of the RAC on records submitted to it are not regarded as binding on anyone. The general aim is that the RAC ought to act as a body producing a well-informed, well-considered, discerning and impartial appraisal of the records submitted to it, in order that at the time such records may be presented more critically than could otherwise happen and that in the future they may be better assessed than is often possible.

The RAC formulates its own procedures but the Convener, who acts as Chairman, is obliged to ensure that the best available expert knowledge from outside the Committee is sought when necessary, to act in close liaison with the RAOU Secretary and to advise the RAOU Secretary of the decision reached on each submission.

Mode of Operation

Records submitted for appraisal may be published or unpublished observations; even a published record may require appraisal. The submission of records for appraisal may originate in various ways. It may be made by the observer who directly submits his record for appraisal. He does not have to be a member of the RAOU. Any person anywhere in the world may submit a personal field record or seek appraisal of a published record of a bird in Australia. Submissions, however, must be made through the RAOU Secretary on a standard Record Submission Form available from the Secretary.

When appraisal is sought for a published record, the person submitting the record must be willing to get in touch with the author and request him to complete a Record Submission Form. This the RAC is not willing to do because it is beyond the Committee's terms of reference to seek submissions, quite apart from the in-

volvement that the Committee would draw upon itself through such a step. The responsibility therefore lies with the person(s) seeking appraisal.

If the Editor of the *Emu* receives a submission for which he needs appraisal he will ask the contributor to complete a Record Submission Form and will send this to the RAC. It is generally not adequate for the Editor simply to send the contribution direct to the RAC. The standard form seeks to elicit detailed information considered necessary for the process of critical appraisal. Such detail would not usually be included in a manuscript for publication.

Atlas Scheme

As the Atlas Scheme develops, much preliminary sifting of records will probably be carried out by its organizers and regional workers. The Atlas Committee may, however, from time to time have reason to submit records to the RAOU Secretary for referral to the RAC. By arrangement such submissions may be on the Atlas Scheme's standard Unusual Record Form A which is very similar to the standard Record Submission Form.

Records Appropriate for Appraisal

The RAC will appraise whatever is directed to it by the Council but there is the question of what should be considered appropriate for appraisal. Broadly there are two kinds of records: those that represent new species for Australia; and those that represent extensions of range of Australian species within, or possibly outside Australia. New species for Australia obviously call for appraisal, as would an unexpected sighting of an Australian species outside Australia. However, extension of range within Australia may vary from a minor local extension to a new State record of a species likely to be seen in that State sooner or later or of a bird one would never expect to see in the State or region concerned.

Although it was first envisaged that all extensions of range within Australia would be referred to the RAC it has become apparent that this is neither practicable nor desirable. The procedure of appraisal is demanding and time-taking and it would be wrong to regard the RAC as a panel for bird-identification when adequate sources for local appraisal already exist in most regions. It therefore needs to be emphasized that for efficient application of the RAC's time and effort, and to make it possible for the process of appraisal of eligible submissions to be maintained at the highest standard, records other than new records for Australia (inside or outside Australia) will not often be accepted by Council for submission to the RAC. Thus it may be said that the RAC will be required by Council to appraise all new national records and whatever other records the Council directs to it as significant enough for appraisal.

Procedure Followed Within RAC

When a completed Record Submission Form is received for appraisal, the Convener, as he thinks necessary, seeks expert opinion on the submission from any available sources. Photostats of the submission, sketches, comment from outside experts, extracts from relevant literature and duplicates of photographs are then sent to each member of the RAC. Each RAC member, after perusal of all information, is required to vote for or against acceptance of the record. If the vote of the five members is unanimous either for or against, it is regarded as the decision of the RAC on the submission and the RAOU Secretary

is advised accordingly. If the vote is divided, regardless of the numbers (anyone voting against a submission is required to give reasons) the comments and vote of every member are photostated and recirculated throughout the Committee and a second vote, in the light of members' written opinions, is requested. If on the second vote four votes are in favour, the submission is accepted; if less than four, it is not accepted.

Several important aspects of the RAC procedure and outlook should be noted:

1. The RAC does not reject submissions. It cannot say whether or not the observer saw a particular bird. All it can do is decide whether a submission contains information sufficiently definitive of the species and whether *all* elements of the description and submission are convincing enough for it to be accepted. This approach gives more scope for the application of critical expert knowledge than might, at first, seem likely.
2. Any submission may be re-examined if additional evidence is provided.
3. The RAC seeks expert opinion from anyone in Australia or overseas when necessary and pursues enquiries for as long as necessary to gain adequate information upon which to base its decision.
4. The RAC believes that by striving for thoroughness and by readiness to pursue its enquiries as far as is necessary it will be moving toward the kind of standards that members of the RAOU would wish to be used in sight identification. As time goes on it is

hoped that inclusion of the statement 'Accepted by RAC' in published accounts of unusual records will add significant weight to them.

5. It is inevitable and in fact desirable that members of the RAC will be people scattered throughout Australia. This preserves the Committee's association and acquaintance with different regions and many observers. It also minimizes the sense of exclusion that would inevitably attach to a Committee formed, for example, in one city. The disadvantage of this arrangement is the impossibility of having round-table meetings and the difficulty of trying to conduct such meetings with four people simultaneously by mail. The first twelve months of the Committee's life necessitated a number of discussions on aspects and concepts of fundamental importance to the RAC's function. On each occasion RAC members felt that plain sailing lay ahead, only to find some complications had to be thrashed out. However this formative period was necessary. With the production of an acceptable Record Submission Form and some practice in its use, procedures are settling into a more satisfactory routine. We feel that a sufficiently firm basis has been laid to allow future appraisals to proceed with a minimum delay. When outside opinion is sought some delay is, of course, inevitable.

A. R. McEVEY, Convener, RAC.

15 April 1977.

SUMMARY OF APPRAISALS TO JANUARY 1977

Species	Date of Observation	Location	RAC Decision	Date of Decision
Snow Petrel <i>Pagodroma nivea</i>	15 Sept. 1974	13 km sw Victor Harbour, SA	Not accepted (Highly probable)	27 Aug. 1975
Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	26 Dec. 1974	3 km sw Canungra, Qld	Accepted	19 Jan. 1976
Christmas Island Frigatebird <i>Fregata andrewsi</i>	21 Jan. 1974	Nakara, NT	Accepted	11 Mar. 1976
Pheasant-tailed Jacana <i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>	22 Dec. 1974	Paraburdoo, WA	Not Accepted (Reconsidered) Accepted	14 April 17 Sept. 1976
Franklin's Gull <i>Larus pipixcan</i>	27 Mar. 1974	Jurien Bay, WA	Not Accepted (Possible)	6 Aug. 1976
Broad-billed Sandpiper <i>Limicola falcinellus</i>	21 Nov. 1975	Perth, WA	Withdrawn under change of policy to confine appraisals to national records except in special instances.	
Magellanic Penguin <i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	31 Mar. 1976 (Specimen)	Phillip Island, Vic.	Appraisal in progress; awaiting information from overseas.	
Franklin's Gull <i>Larus pipixcan</i>	7 Mar. 1976	Geraldton, WA	Awaiting appraisal.	
Mangrove Heron <i>Butorides striatus</i>	25 Jan. 1976	Port Pirie, SA	Withdrawn under change of policy as above.	