



# Illinois Ornithological Society

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## **President's Message**

When Bob Erickson, Al Stokie, and Paul Sweet discovered a Red-cockaded Woodpecker in Illinois Beach State Park on 19 August 2000, they had second thoughts about breaking the news to the rest of the birding community. If the bird couldn't be relocated, would anyone believe them? This bird was ranked fourth in a list of the all-time most astonishing vagrant birds within North America. (S.G. Mlodinow, "Aves Inexpectata: Amazing Vagrants within North America," *Birders Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 146-157, June and July 2001.) Evidence that will convince others of a positive identification in such an extreme case must be very, very solid.

Fortunately for Bob, Al, and Paul, their task became simpler when the woodpecker stayed put for four months, and a large number of people were able to study it, make notes, and take numerous photographs. But at the time of the initial sighting, they couldn't know that the bird would stay. They understood what they observed and recorded right then might be the whole basis upon which others could judge whether a Red-cockaded Woodpecker visited Illinois.

Chances are you've been in one, and more likely many, situations in which either you were trying to convince someone else of the identity of a bird you observed, or someone else was trying to convince you. I've been on both sides of these discussions and expect I will be again. Sometimes I'm convincing; sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I get convinced; sometimes I don't. So it goes.

Regardless of the outcome, and even regardless of whether I'm the convincer or the convincee, I often learn something during one of these discussions. The information I gain helps me be a better birder. It focuses my thinking about not only the rarities but also about what there is to know about the common birds in our area. And it prepares me to make better observations when I find myself in similar situations.

This learning and sharing of information is important, and it happens most readily when the focus is on what it takes to be convinced, and not whether the original observer was right or wrong. The observed facts have already been logged; they can't be changed. The issue is only whether they are sufficient to be convincing, and also how much we can learn from the experience.

So, suppose you find yourself convinced about a bird sighting someone is describing. Think of your role as that of informing your fellow birder what would convince you, what you would have looked for, what the critical issues are, and why you think the sighting is unusual. Show them how to convince you, maybe or maybe not for that sighting, but certainly for those yet to come. And if you find yourself in the position of not having convinced someone of your observation, remember that doesn't necessarily mean you were wrong. Instead, it's an opportunity to learn what would make your case more convincing. Through the sharing and debating of bird sightings, in a friendly and non-confrontational manner, we as a birding community can improve our collective observational skills.

Bob, Paul, and Al were ready to make a convincing case for an astounding Red-cockaded Woodpecker sighting. We can all work together to improve the odds that the next folks who find themselves looking at a mega-rarity are prepared as well.

— Geoff Williamson

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