



I've been involved with the assessment of county rarities for over ten years now, with the past seven of those as the county committee's chairman. During that time, whilst you never get the feeling you've seen it all when it comes to rarity assessment, you do believe there are certain things you're unlikely to come across. Pure, unadulterated fabrication of a county rarity was one of those latter things. Sure, we find submissions not proven from time to time and whatever the reason for our verdict, I had yet to believe it was ever down to nothing but a lie, that the bird never even existed, that it was a complete and utter string. Then one day it happened.

This article is intended to illustrate, not only this frankly absurd and deeply disappointing event but also the unseen work of a rarities committee and to demonstrate just one of the unfortunate needs for record assessment. Those who I have briefly discussed the incident with have all, without exception, been eager to hear its full account which has until now remained untold.

So, roll back to...

Tuesday, 14th September 2010

A known observer located an *aythya* duck on Teal Scrape at Pennington Flash which appeared to him to display characteristics of Ferruginous Duck. Unfortunately, he was unable to confirm the sighting at this time nor subsequently. It should be strongly emphasised at this point that this sighting and the observer involved is wholly legitimate and has no connection to subsequent events beyond the species implicated.

Thursday, 16th September 2010

A very experienced and well-respected observer noticed an apparently unusual *aythya* in Rammies at Pennington Flash which, due to failing light and poor views, he was unable to confirm its identity, despite at the time feeling it displayed certain characteristics reminiscent of Ferruginous Duck. Subsequently and in light of his observations, the observer abandoned the record due to important identification criteria apparently not being present on the bird during his observations.

Monday, 20th September 2010

I am contacted via email by an observer who claims to have seen a Ferruginous Duck on Teal Scrape at Pennington Flash on the 18th September 2010. He refers to "last week's confusion" which I assume to mean the events of the 14th and in particular the relevant posts on the Manchester Birding forum and furthermore claims to have obtained a photograph of the bird. The observer is at that time a registered user of the Manchester Birding forum with several perfectly reasonable posts to his name and had previously sent me a handful of out-of-county 'scarce' images for use on the Manchester Birding galleries. The observer claims that he thought it was a Ferruginous Duck but wasn't sure and asked if I could confirm the identity. The original image sent by the observer is included below.



A series of emails then ensued between the observer and myself. Initially, I asked for any further images as the county rarities committee has set guidelines on accepting single photo only submissions and also for a confirmation of the time and date they were taken. I received the reply that he had only taken "a group shot of a pool full" and had only realised what he had captured when he enlarged the shot back at home. The time and date was also eventually confirmed as the 18th September 2010 and 11am. At this point I began to feel suspicious.

A check of the exif data on the image found the date on it as taken on the 19th of September, though of course there could be perfectly valid reasons for this. The ISO of the image was very high indeed (in fact as high as the model of camera would go), yet the image was alleged to have been taken at 11am and the weather had been fine on that date. I also doubted the possibility of capturing an image the quality of which he had supplied me with by merely taking an overview of the scrape and then cropping it at home. Something really didn't feel quite right.

Further emails followed as I attempted to enlighten the observer of the county rarity submission process and its requirement. The replies I received continued to further my suspicion, they were always brief and wherever possible avoided the questions I asked. At one point the observer claimed that if he'd realised what he'd taken at the time he would have 'gone to town' but that in his limited experience he had just put it down to a pool full of Tufties and Coots. Sometimes it's the littlest things, but Teal Scrape very rarely has anything more than a couple of Coots on it besides a handful of Tufted Duck! I therefore asked for the uncropped originals as then I might at least be able to see some identifiable background. The observer replied that he had deleted all his other shots, saying he was "new to the game" and would obviously learn from it. All very odd.

At that point it seemed that the sighting had hit a brick wall in any case. I would not circulate, nor the committee assess regardless, a single photo submission that showed no identifiable background and came from a completely unknown single-observer sighting. Although it had previously crossed my mind to search the Internet for possible images which matched that of the alleged Pennington Flash bird, I had not the time nor the inclination and to be perfectly honest, I felt that if anything, the image had probably been taken from a captive wildfowl collection, something which would be extremely difficult to prove anyway. The episode was therefore basically closed, until a chance conversation with Rob Thorpe (who considering his Wigan borough year list attempt was enquiring about the original report on the 14th) where I revealed to him the subsequent saga and my thoughts on the affair. Rob willingly volunteered to scour the Internet on the off chance the image provided to me might have been taken from it. Less than half an hour after I had emailed the image to Rob he contacted me to inform me I should check my emails. He had come up trumps.

The image that had allegedly been taken at Pennington Flash on the 18th September 2010 had actually been taken at Corbet Lough, County Down, Ireland on 26th November 2007. It had been taken by Irish birder Joe Devlin and been 'lifted' from the website www.birdsireland.com.



Above: Ferruginous Duck, Corbet Lough, County Down, Ireland, 26th November 2007 by Joe Devlin. This image is the actual one lifted from the birdsireland website and attempted to be passed off as taken at Pennington Flash

The comparative images below are of the alleged Pennington Flash bird (top) and Corbet Lough bird (below). The fraudulent observer has merely turned up the colour, brightness and contrast (to 'burn-out' the image), plus in his original (at the top of this article) he has merely reversed Joe Devlin's image so the bird is facing the other way. Compare the two images below carefully, in particular the ripples in the water. They are evidently one and the same!



Greater Manchester had exposed its first proven case of an entirely fraudulent rarity claim. Whilst I was satisfied my initial suspicions had been vindicated it was without doubt a sad day for county birding in general. I have subsequently been asked many times as to what drives someone to do such a thing but frankly I have no idea. Perhaps the quest for kudos is so strong in some observers. Perhaps it was a case of genuinely trying to fool a committee. Whatever the reasons are, there is no surprise that the observer has never replied to my request for an explanation to it all.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Rob Thorpe for his invaluable assistance in locating the 'lifted' image.

Ian McKerchar, February 2011

www.manchesterbirding.com