



Roundtable

... with Louis C. Fink

Chickadees—Can You Recognize a Hybrid?

On 6 October 1973 I was birding on Richland Balsam, which lies on the border of Haywood and Jackson Counties in North Carolina. At an elevation of about 6,200 feet I heard a small flock of chickadees. Hoping them to be Black-capped Chickadees (*Parus atricapillus*), I began squeaking, swishing, and imitating the Saw-whet Owl's call. My vocalizations were quite effective. Good numbers of both species of kinglets, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Solitary Vireos immediately flocked in the firs over me. Astonishingly, the chickadees did not respond to my noises, and I began to suspect these were no "ordinary" chickadees. After much time and effort I was able to get brief looks at two of the birds.

The birds appeared larger than Carolina Chickadees (*P. carolinensis*), perhaps the same size as the Black-capped (with which I am familiar in West Virginia, northern Virginia, and the Great Smokies). However, there seemed to be a clear separation between the black bib and the white breast and very little white in the wing, both field marks of the Carolina. The birds seemed too shy and restless to be Black-capped Chickadees, much like the Carolina in behavior. The song was the two-note one of the Black-capped, but the calls resembled those of the Carolina in tempo and tonal quality. Certainly the habitat was that of the Black-capped in the southern Appalachians (spruce-fir). Their strangest characteristic was their absence of curiosity. I can't recall ever having squeaked for 15 minutes with chickadees of either species in the vicinity without attracting them to me.

A paper by Tanner (*Auk*, 69:407-424) appears to shed some light on the chickadee problem. The Black-capped Chickadees collected in the Plott Balsams, just to the northwest of Richland Balsam, had a lower tail to wing length ratio than Black-capped collected in the Great Smokies. Tanner suggested that since this species is rare outside of the Smokies, some of the birds may have been forced to mate with Carolina Chickadees, which are common on the lower elevations of the mountains and have a very low tail to wing length ratio. Offspring of this mating would likely have wing and tail measurements between those of the two parent species. Although Tanner found no positive evidence of hybridization in the southern Appalachians, he indicates that it is possible in areas where Black-capped populations are very low, such as in the Plott Balsams.

In my opinion the birds I saw on Richland Balsam were hybrids, or better called "intergrades." I certainly don't want to sound like an expert on the subject, because I studied only two or three birds and did not collect them. However, I would like to stress the point that an observer should not automatically call any chickadee he sees in spruce-fir forests a Black-capped, especially at sites outside the Smokies. Although I doubt that "pure" Carolina Chickadees occur in spruce-fir forests, I suspect that chickadees on some of North Carolina's higher mountains are intergrades of the two species. I will greatly appreciate comments on my opinions from those who have done much field work on chickadees in the southern Appalachians.—HARRY E. LeGRAND JR., 331 Yadkin Drive, Raleigh, N.C. 27609.

NOTE—A search through my library reveals two references to the interesting situation which Mr. LeGrand raises. *Audubon Bird Guide Eastern Land Birds* (Richard

H. Pough, 1949) says, "Despite the remarkable similarities between the Carolina Chickadee and the Black-capped Chickadee, the boundary between their ranges is sharply defined, and apparent hybrids are uncommon."

A Field Guide to the Birds (Roger Tory Peterson, 1947) says, "The two are best identified by the localities where found and by voice. The slight differences in the wings are not reliable because of season, wear, angle of light, etc. Moreover the two intergrade where their ranges meet."—L.C.F.

The 600 Club

Earl R. Greene, down on St. Simon's Island in Georgia, is recordkeeper for the 600 Club, that elite group of about 100 men and women who have identified 600 species or more in North America north of the Rio Grande. The only Carolinian I find listed is Edwin L. Stearns of South Carolina with 634 species. Joseph W. Taylor of New York leaves me slack-jawed by topping the list with 710! (I'll have 410 if somebody will show me those Lapland Longspurs at Roanoke Rapids.)

Editorial Comment

The *Augusta (Georgia) Chronicle* wrote, "... the objective of the Christmas Bird Count is to identify as many bird species as possible in a given area."

I don't believe that Dr. Fred Denton—who showed me my first Pileated Woodpecker in Augusta 30 years ago when the bird was elusive—would agree with that statement. The editors of the 73rd Christmas Bird Count have pointed out the "increase in the use of the Count for deriving scientific conclusions." If observers are chasing randomly around the country adding species to the day's list, a scientifically valid survey of the bird-life of the area will not result.

Yet we all hear exultant cries of "We logged more species than last year!" Cities vie—not for accurate counts of bird populations—but for dubious records of "high counts." Invitations to participate are couched in words like, "We need your help to beat last year's record."

In Atlanta (where a valuable record of changing bird-life has been compiled for more than 30 years), the area was abandoned in favor of a new location which would be "more fun." In many places, there are reports of competent observers leaving their home bases in favor of a Count area where they may add a bird to their life-lists.

The Count editors say "things will be much tougher" in the future. Uncorroborated sight records will be thrown out, rarities will have to be documented. Let's hope the emphasis will return to a scientific sampling of the bird life, maintained from year to year.

This is not to say the Christmas Bird Count should not be a pleasure, nor that adding Horned Larks to the Raleigh list should not be counted among life's little satisfactions. Let's just make sure we don't overlook the purpose of this "premier exercise in mass masochism and cooperative science."

Bird-finding in North Carolina

Many members of CBC have promised to send in directions to their favorite places. We'll publish them as they come in.

UPPER COASTAL PLAIN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH STATION – Less than 10 miles from Rocky Mount. Drive north on Route 43, taking SR 1224 to the left when you reach a "Y" in the road.

Headquarters on the right; ask permission to park; look for birds.

The fields have Water Pipits and Eastern Bluebirds; the lake has at least six Common Nipe and an occasional Whistling Swan in winter. Buteos are overhead.

Walk across the road and inspect a smaller pond for woodpeckers, sparrows, Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Cedar Waxwing, and more. Several patches of bamboo provide a roost for at least 1,000 House Sparrows, a remarkable sight.