

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Re: Hybridism and the Rate of Change

*Arctic's* multidisciplinary nature makes for interesting reading: it is stimulating to find articles ranging from the technical to the philosophical. In the September issue of Volume 65, I read “First Report of a Snow Bunting × Lapland Longspur Hybrid” and “The Power and Peril of ‘Vulnerability’...” with equal interest.

Hybridism has always fascinated naturalists and biologists, particularly in birds because they are so conspicuous and the markings so distinct. There are vast records of hybrids over the centuries, and of course they were fascinating to Darwin. Waterfowl, particularly ducks, are noted for interbreeding. So it was interesting to see the outcome of two boldly marked passerines, displayed in a full-page colour figure (p. 346). The authors note the potential influence of climate change in range extensions and conclude that their report “highlights the importance of reporting field observations that may indicate ecological changes affecting the hybridization rates....” I noted that the record was made as part of the Canadian Snow Bunting Network. I would like to add a word of caution, based on my own experience, regarding the use of hybrid records and their relevance to gauging the rate of climate change.

Recently, I documented the first record of a bufflehead × common goldeneye hybrid, as well as the first record of inter-specific mate choice. Both species are conspicuous on their wintering grounds, but much less so on their

summering grounds, so that there is more opportunity to observe the hybrid than to see the mating combination. In researching the records, I found only two putative cases of out-crossing of the bufflehead in the 20th century, but I found 12 cases in the last decade, most of it posted online through birders' networks, along with good photographs showing the strange combination of features.

As concluded in Finley and Huot (2010:31), the Internet revolution, digital photography, and the rising popularity of bird watching have led to “an exponential increase in sightings of hybrids that are not being documented as they once were in the scientific literature.” This increase, which is a cultural artifact and not a statistical trend, “demonstrates the power of the Internet to amplify the prevalence of rare phenomena and cautions us about jumping to conclusions regarding the rate of change.”

Which brings us to the topic of the power and peril of “Vulnerability.”

## REFERENCE

- Finley, J.K., and Huot, S. 2010. Interspecific mate choice and hybridism in the bufflehead, *Bucephala albeola*. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 124(1):28–31.

Sincerely,

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