

COMMENTS ON THE USAGE OF THE TERM "STATUS" AND SOME ASSOCIATED TERMINOLOGY

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Some words acquire such broad and variable meanings that they inevitably must be defined for the occasion or compounded with an adjective to limit and identify their scope of meaning. Such words obviously have no place in the field of science unless suitably defined before use or qualified when used. Unfortunately status has developed into one of these words and it is widely used in ornithology and the other fields of zoology without definition or qualification.

The original connotation of status was rank or position on some graduated rating or merit scale. It is now regularly used to mean classification in relation to any descriptive system or combination of descriptive systems. As a result we find status being used in ornithological and zoological literature to mean any, or any combination, of at least the following: abundance status (population size status); population density status; breeding status; origin status; existence status; distribution status; population dynamics status; specific or generic status; movement status; conservation status; game status; food preference status; and habitat preference status.

The nature of the problem is well illustrated in a passage from the RAOU Newsletter of December 1982 (page 3) setting out some of the principles proposed for the Handbook of Australian Birds. The Newsletter stated:

"Species will be placed according to status in the following categories:

1. Breeding within our limits (resident and migratory);
2. Introduced, with viable breeding populations;
3. Extinct in historical times;
4. Regular non-breeding migrants;
5. Accidentals (may occur annually but generally with fewer than 20 records per year or species with fewer than 20 known records)."

This confusion is made even more significant when it is pointed out that, in the proposed treatment of species in the Handbook, the concept of

status was not mentioned. In addition to highlighting the confusion associated with the term status the above extract also illustrates some of the other confusing terms associated with status. It however does not illustrate the problems associated with the terminology of abundance and population density status.

The problems associated with abundance status probably stem from the widespread failure to differentiate between observability and abundance. As a consequence the terminology that may be appropriate to observability, common (commonly seen) and rare (rarely seen) for instance, is used instead of more appropriate words indicating size or density of a population. This however is not the only source of confusion in this area. Authors use all manner of variations in, and interchanges of, observability and abundance terminology and population size and population density terminology.

An outstanding example of this confusion and lack of standardisation is provided in one of the better known books on a major family of Australian birds. In this book the author provides a section termed Status, in the description of each species. He does not define status but with reasonable consistency restricts the meaning to abundance, population density, population dynamics and conservation status. In relation to abundance and population density status he provides his own assessments and quotes the assessments of various other past and present authorities. The terminology used by the author and the authorities quoted in this context include the following:

Very common;	Fairly common;
Common;	Moderately common;
Common and wide-	Not common;
spread;	Uncommon;
Locally common;	Never very common;
Relatively common;	Generally uncommon;
Comparatively common;	Quite uncommon;
Less common (than a	Rare;
common species);	Somewhat rare;

Rather rare;	Extremely abundant;
Quite rare;	Quite abundant;
Generally rare;	Scarce;
By no means rare;	Generally scarce;
Not rare;	Rather scarce;
Very rare;	Very numerous;
Extremely rare;	Numerous;
Very plentiful;	Quite numerous;
Plentiful;	Not numerous;
Quite plentiful;	Frequently reported;
Fairly plentiful;	Well established;
Not plentiful;	Stronghold is in the north;
Very abundant;	Total numbers very small;
The most abundant;	Casual visitor.
Abundant;	
Particularly abundant;	

In similar context the following example illustrates that the problem is not restricted to ornithological publications. The most recently published comprehensive book on Australian mammals includes a brief statement on status for each of the species described. In this case, status primarily covers abundance status but includes in most cases some consideration of distribution or habitat distribution status and conservation status. This book avoids the problems of abundance terminology illustrated above by standardisation. However the selection of terminology, the lack of consistency of correlation between terms and population numbers and the random changes from population abundance (total numbers) to population density (local or regional density) make the comments on status equally unsatisfactory. The terminology used and the estimated equivalent total population size significance of this terminology are as follows:

Abundant	—	1,000,000+	to	10,000,000+;
Common	—	20,000?	to	10,000,000 ;
Sparse	—	10,000	to	1,000,000 ;
Rare	—	0	to	100,000 ;
Extinct	—	0	to	.

These are only two examples that illustrate the present unsatisfactory position with abundance terminology. Other examples appearing in both books and papers are numerous and in fact I have been unable to find one book or one paper that might be used as an example of satisfactory presentation of abundance terminology.

In addition to this abundance status problem there are terminology problems associated with other aspects of status. The most frequently used problem terms are resident, vagrant and accidental.

Resident is a word almost universally misused in ornithological literature and should probably

be banned from use. The use of "resident" in the RAOU Newsletter excerpt quoted earlier is perhaps typical of its misuse. In this case "resident" probably covers species that are sedentary, nomadic, migratory within Australia, migratory with partial movement beyond Australia, endemic to Australia and distributed beyond Australia but not necessarily migratory.

Vagrant is often misused, particularly in connection with bird lists of particular areas. A species that occurs at a location within its known and accepted distribution range and normal habitat should not be classed as a vagrant at that location just because an observer has seen it in that area on only a few occasions.

Like "vagrant", "accidental" is open to misuse. It should be restricted to describe occurrences of a species well beyond its normally accepted range that obviously result from some major abnormal natural climatic event. To suggest that with records of less than 20 per year a species should be classified as accidental to Australia is clearly unacceptable. There is no basic reason to classify even a single recorded occurrence as accidental if there is no known natural event associated with that occurrence.

In the foregoing discussion only three illustrations have been used. However many others are available and anyone interested in this problem should check their bird books and journals such as *The Emu* and even *Corella*. Such checks should convince most people that the problems of status terminology are serious and require urgent attention.

The steps that I would suggest to improve the present unsatisfactory position are:

- Encourage other ornithologists to comment on status terminology and circulate all comments as widely as possible;
- Authors and editors take care to see that terms associated with status including the term status are carefully selected and clearly defined before use;
- An authority such as the RAOU prepare recommended definitions of the main terms associated with status and circulate these to Australian ornithologists;
- Researchers and authors give far more attention to numerical expression of population size in cases where studies and resultant publications are concerned with abundance status and population density status.