

## Self-found rules – by the HOS self-found panel

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Finding one's own birds – and in particular, rare birds – is the driving force for many birders, and there has been much debate over the years about “self-found rules”, which usually ends up going round and round in circles with endless hypothetical situations. In order to try to put the matter to rest 33 real case scenarios were circulated to everyone listed on the “Self-found” page of the listing section on the “Goingbirding” website, whose email address I have. The range of opinions proved to be surprisingly varied, but a majority verdict was reached for all scenarios, resulting in the rules set out below. My thanks to John Clark, Tim Doran, Philip Fawkes, Richard Ford, Alan Lewis, Steve Mansfield, Amy Robjohns, Graham Stephenson and Marek Walford for all their help putting this together.

Usually it is obvious and clear cut when a bird is self-found: the observer being the first to locate and identify a particular bird. A genuine self-find requires the observer to have no prior knowledge of a specific individual (or individuals) being present at that site or nearby, and most species are either common enough to be easily self-found or scarce/rare enough to be obvious when they are self-found. Note that rarities must be accepted by the relevant records committee, and that your name doesn't necessarily have to appear next to the record for it to count as self-found (and equally, your name appearing next to a record doesn't necessarily mean that you found it).

Of course, this is just a bit of fun, and some people may choose to be even stricter than these rules, while others might like to be a bit more lenient. However, a set of rules should at least present a level playing field for everyone posting their list on the “Goingbirding” website. There are six main areas of contention, which are discussed below, and some of the 33 real life scenarios are included to illustrate specific points.

### 1. Multi-observer finds (including “In on the find”)

#### 1.1 Any number of people can count a particular bird as self-found if they are present at the moment of discovery AND identify the bird, or contribute to its identification.

The ‘moment of discovery’ does not necessarily mean simply noticing a bird is present, but the moment when it is realised that the bird is of significance. This might happen for a number of observers simultaneously if, for example, a bird is flushed, calls or drops in in front of them, or a bird is seen as a result of someone asking “What's this?” or wrongly identifying a bird as a common species. A person can NOT count it if they haven't identified it (or played some part in its eventual identification) or it has been identified and they have to be directed to it. In other words, you can't claim a self-found if you happen to be standing next to someone who finds and identifies a rare bird.

The following examples count as self-found:

*June 13<sup>th</sup>, a birder is raptor watching at Acres Down when he hears another birder say “Is that a shrike?”. He looks to where the birder is looking and sees that it is a black-eared wheatear. This counts as self-found as he was present at the moment of discovery and the initial identification was woefully wrong.*

*1987 August Bank Holiday Sunday, a birder enters a hide at Lavell's Lake, Berkshire and finds a novice birder already present. There is a brief exchange while the birder opens one of the hide flaps: “Much out there?”, novice: “There's one wader, but I'm not sure what it is.” The birder then scans the scrape and finds... a Wilson's phalarope. The birder can count this as self-found as the novice didn't realise the significance of the bird, which had therefore effectively not been found.*

The following example does not count as self-found:

*Spurn, October: Birder A is heading towards a group of birders watching an olive-backed pipit at Kilnsea when he comes across three others watching something. He asks what it is and they reply: 'A*

*shrike, possibly red-backed". He cheekily asks if he can have a look and to his amazement it isn't a Red-backed. Birder A eventually clinches Britain's third masked shrike.*

This doesn't count as birder A wasn't present at the moment of discovery; the finders realised the significance of a shrike, even if its identity was uncertain. This is a re-identification (see later).

## **1.2 Any number of birders can count a bird as self-found if they find the bird independently, even with a significant time difference between the sightings.**

*Example: A birder returns from holiday, visits his patch and finds a singing great reed warbler. It turns out it has been present a few days, although he was not aware of this.*

This counts as self-found as the birder had **no prior knowledge** of the bird.

Actively avoiding bird news isn't realistically likely to result in lots more self-finds, and these days especially it is much harder to avoid such information (nevertheless, I'm planning to put my phone on silent when I'm sea-watching next spring!). Note that finding an unusually large number of birders scoping a particular lake, for example, counts as 'prior knowledge' that something good is present.

## **2. Re-identifications**

### **2.1 Any bird that has been twitched cannot be counted as self-found.**

This includes any "unidentified", "possible", "probable" or indeed "definite" rarities/scarcities that are subsequently identified or re-identified. It also includes following up 'funny' birds reported by non-birders (who have realised it's something unusual). All these birds have already been found.

*Example: a birder twitches a sighting of a possible subalpine warbler on his patch, but suspects it sounds more like a spectacled warbler. Having failed to locate the bird, he returns again in the evening and finds the bird, which is actually an Asian desert warbler.*

This does not count as self-found, as it is a re-identification of a bird found by someone else, and is undeniably the same bird.

Note that a birder can NOT claim a find when a photograph they have published as a common or regular species is re-identified as something rare. Examples include photographs of 'little stint' (actually a semipalmated sandpiper) and 'hobby' (actually Eleonora's falcon). In these cases, the bird is "found" by someone who wasn't present and hadn't even seen the bird (and no, they can't count it!).

## **3. Re-finds – finding the same bird at the same location.**

The general consensus is that it is very rare for a re-find to count as self-found, since by definition it involves prior knowledge – even if it is with hindsight. If the probability that it is a new bird exceeds the probability that it is the same bird returning, then it obviously counts, so the problem generally arises with particularly rare birds, birds that are individually identifiable (e.g. ringed), long-staying birds going missing, or birds returning in a subsequent season (e.g. a bird returning to a site where it overwintered). The general consensus is as follows:

### **3.1 A "re-find" can NOT count as self-found if it occurs in the same season as the last sighting, and can only be counted ONCE in a subsequent season, at which point it becomes a 'known returner'.**

*Example: a greater yellowlegs spends a day at Posbrook Floods, Titchfield on 11<sup>th</sup> January. On 11<sup>th</sup> April, a birder finds a greater yellowlegs at Titchfield Haven. This counts as self-found, as it occurs three months after the first, apparently brief, visit. After not being seen for eight days, another birder finds it again on 19<sup>th</sup> April and then having not been seen for nearly three weeks, another birder finds it again on 9<sup>th</sup> May. Neither of these sightings counts as self-found, as it is clearly mobile and elusive.*

## **4. Relocations – finding the same bird at a different location.**

#### **4.1 A bird that has flown in a particular direction can NOT subsequently (in the short-term) be self-found by an observer who knows it has travelled in that direction.**

This might be a seabird, or indeed land-bird, that is being tracked along the coast, or a bird that has been seen to fly off in a particular direction. Any observer who is aware that the bird is heading their way, or aim to intercept it, or try to relocate it at another site, cannot then claim it as self-found. 'In the short term' certainly means the same day, but could mean a few days where a bird is likely to have gone to ground.

*Example: a birder at Sandy Point, Hampshire hears that five white storks have flown west over Littlehampton in Sussex, 25km away. He scans the horizon to the east and picks them up circling in the sky. This does not count as self-found, as the storks were evidently following the coast.*

#### **4.2 A bird that is frequenting a roost can NOT be claimed as self-found when it is found feeding elsewhere or flying to the roost.**

Several rare gulls visiting various night roosts have subsequently been located during the day. Whilst this might be rewarding, none has been sufficiently distant from the roost (the furthest known being 12km away) to merit being self-found.

#### **4.3 A bird that has disappeared from a site (without its direction being known) CAN be claimed as self-found at another site if it is 10km or more away from the original site.**

*Example: A lesser scaup visits Longham Lakes in Dorset from October 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>, but has gone on 27<sup>th</sup>. A birder visits Blashford Lakes – 14km away – on 28<sup>th</sup> and finds the lesser scaup. This counts as self-found as it was not known in which direction the bird had left.*

### **5. Additional individuals**

#### **5.1 Additional birds of the same species count as self-found, as long as the number of birds being twitched is explicit.**

Any ambiguity or assumption whatsoever (e.g. based on insufficient information) negates the possibility of a 'self-found'. However, if there is an influx, for example storm petrels, then additional birds can be self-found while the influx is in the process of unfolding. The following examples count as self-found:

*A birder twitches a Temminck's stint on The Deeps at Farlington Marsh, quickly finds the Temminck's, scans around and finds a second.*

*A crowd of twitchers are watching a red-eyed vireo on Scilly. Suddenly a second red-eyed vireo chases the first. Everyone who is watching at that moment, and identifies the second bird, can count it as self-found.*

### **6. Known sites (breeding or wintering)**

#### **6.1 A scarce or localised species can NOT be self-found at a site that is known to support that species.**

In other words, if you want to see that species, then you go to that site. Any specific knowledge of a specific species at a specific site automatically negates the possibility of a self-find at that site, and a few examples in Hampshire include: black-necked grebe in Langstone Harbour, purple sandpiper at Southsea Castle, honey-buzzard at Acres Down, turtle dove at Martin Down and willow tit at

Netherton Bottom or Dummer. A site is a specific location (e.g. Blackwater Arboretum, Cheesefoot Head), and not a general area (e.g. New Forest, The Downs) or habitat type (e.g. heathland, chalk downland).

A known site is not the same as a site being “good” for a particular species, with no guarantee that the species is actually there. Species considered too scarce for sites to qualify as “known sites” include Bewick’s swan (in recent years), quail, spotted crake, roseate tern and great grey shrike (i.e. any of these found anywhere, with no prior knowledge, can count as self-found).

These rules are always subject to review, and if anyone has any real examples which might suggest that a rule needs amending please send them to [andyhayling@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:andyhayling@hotmail.co.uk)

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