

Brown Pelican  
21 Mar 1992  
Lake Rathbun, Appanoose Co., IA  
\*Exline  
IBL 62:74, 63:69

Record Number: 92-09  
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Nancy Exline, DNR, Wallace Building, Des Moines, IA 50319  
(6/30/93)

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 62:74  
Records Committee: IBL 63:69

VOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

NA, The description is suggestive of Brown Pelican but lacks details needed for positive identification. Where exactly was white on neck -- front or nape? What is meant by feet extending to rear -- were they extended beyond tail? What is shape of head and bill? Except for the general description of size (which was not a direct comparison with White Pelican) the details could be American Bittern or sub-adult night herons.

A-D, This documentation presents a classic dilemma -- we have an observer who is probably more skilled at identifying birds than writing documentations. In considering this record, I focused on three species. Sandhill Crane could fit in terms of size, color, and bill length, but flies with neck extended. Great Blue Heron fits in terms of size, and flies with neck bent, but color is wrong. Even the most inexperienced observer describes their color as gray -- "Gray Cranes." Am. White Pelican is not brown in any plumage. Another unavoidable weakness in this documentation is the brevity of the viewing time, and the conditions -- from a moving vehicle. Despite my misgivings, I am voting A-D. This species has an established vagrancy to the Midwest, with records from Mar. to Oct. (Iowa Birds). Finally, the observer claims experience with both this species and A. White Pelican.

A-D, Although an extensive search could not relocate these birds several days later I am voting AD because 1) the description fits Brown Pelican including size, 2) recent vagrancy pattern, and 3) closeness of observation.

A-D, Although details are minimal, they all fit this easily identified and familiar bird. Notes made after prompting and after looking at book, but they don't sound like a book description. A close call.

NA, Size is consistent with Brown Pelican. Overall coloration appears consistent with Brown Pelican. Were White Pelican's there for direct comparison or was size taken from memory? If birds were seen from 20 feet for 1/4 mile there should have been much more detail of plumage noted. Details of plumage as listed on the documentation are very sketchy and incomplete. If cormorants were discussed why not Great Blue Heron? or American Bittern? since they can be or appear to be quite brown with white flecking and some white on the neck in flight. This is probably a good record of Brown Pelican but I want to see what my fellow reviewers have

to say before I vote to accept this record. As it stands now this record is not beyond reasonable doubt.

A-D, While wishing for more details, I feel adequate information was presented to point to Brown Pelican and eliminate a cormorant. I'll be lenient and vote A-D.

REVOTE: 5 A-D, 1 NA, 1 "O"

0 [no comment]

NA, AD voters use phrases such as "wishing for more details," "despite my misgivings," "although details are minimal." Neither the AD or NA voters mention the fact that most reports of Brown Pelican from the midwest are single birds, and that four Brown Pelicans at once would be extremely unlikely. Perhaps AD voters have been influenced by recent sightings of this bird in Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas, but Brown Pelican is still a very rare bird in Iowa. The description is lacking in specific details as mentioned in my first vote comments.

A-D, I think details provided eliminate Am. Bittern, immature night herons, and Great Blue Herons. "Bird flight which paralleled the direction of the vehicle travel for 1/4 mile and was approximately 20 feet above and to the side of the vehicle" does not sound like a behavior of bitterns, night herons, Great Blue Herons, or cormorants which seem to be skittish toward traffic. But this behavior could apply to 4 pelicans in flight.  
REVOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

A-D, In the continuing quest for additional information on this record, I called Nancy Exline. She reiterated her experience with the species in Florida, which included photography at very close distances from a friend's condo on the beach. The only information she provided to me that was not in the documentaion was the fact that she stopped when seeing them, and viewed them from a sitting car. She also noted the large bill, but noted that the flap was not visable becuase "the mouth wasn't open, and it was full of fish." She also reiterated that the size was only slightly smaller than White Pelican, although there were none around for direct comparison. In summary, she appeared to be a knowledgeable and experienced observer who made a correct identification.

NA, I agree that 4 birds would be unusual. This along with the brief description, suggest that we should require unequivocal evidence no matter how much we "feel" the record to be correct.  
VOTE CHANGE: One of the NA voters changed to A-D. Thus the record is Accepted.

## DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

92-09

What species? BROWN PELICANS How many? 4Location? Just west of mile marker 16 on Highway 142 on north side of Rathbun Reservoir,  
Appanoose County.Type of habitat? Upper reaches of one arm of the Reservoir with shallow water and flood prone  
vegetation on S. side of highway, shallow captive water ponds and pasture on north side.When? date(s): March 21, 1992 time: 10:30 a.m. to Who? your name and address: Nancy Exline, DRN, Wallace Building, Des Moines, Ia.others with you: Roy Downing, 4000 S.E. 12, Des Moines, Ia. 50325 (retired DNR employee)others before or after you: unknown

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Large birds slightly smaller than white pelicans with same method of flight as the white. Brown body feathers flecked with white with some white on neck, very long bill, flying with head tucked back to shoulders and feet extended to the rear.

As noted below I am very familiar with this species from visiting a friend that lived on the Gulf Coast of Florida and from seeing White pelicans regularly at Rathbun.

## Similar species and how eliminated:

None except whites-cormorants mentioned as possible by Darrell Howell and Dinsmore; however, I am very familiar with this species also and know it was not cormorants.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? No

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

Overcast but bright morning. Bird flight parralled direction of vehicle travel for 1/4 mile approximately 20' above and to the side of the vehicle. Very close.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Seen on previous trips to Florida in  
March of 1991 and June of 1989.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Informed Darrell Howell and identified in Golden Guide to Birds?  
How long before field notes made? 3-22-92 this form completed? 4-6-92

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