

Clark's Grebe

5 May 1983

Cone Marsh, Louisa Co., IA

*James Sandrock

light phase Western Grebe at that time; IBL 53:48; 54:38

Record Number: 83-22

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

James P. Sandrock

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn, 21 June 1983 (included with review)

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 53:48

Records Committee: IBL 54:38

VOTE: 7-III COMMENT:

III, If Sandrock is accurately describing what he saw I have no qualms of a "light-phase" Western Grebe.

III, Excellent description of light-phase (Clarks) Grebe.

83-22
105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.
Westerville, OH 43081
21 June 1983

Dear Tom:

I'm looking forward to the I.C.U. meeting in October. I'll let you know about my travel plans and provide you with some slides at a later date.

My thoughts on the documentations are as follows:

Mississippi Kite: definitely a Northern Harrier

Black-legged Kittiwake: definitely a first-year Ring-billed Gull!
The absence of head and nape markings, bill color and tail shape eliminate the possibility of a kittiwake.

Laughing Gull: the description does not eliminate a sub-adult Franklin's Gull (which would have a similar wing pattern with no white separating the gray mantle from the black primaries.) Since she did not describe bill and leg color or the black hood in detail, I cannot accurately age this bird (and hence cannot identify it to species). Given its location in extreme western Iowa, I would imagine that a Franklin's would be much more likely.

Black-headed Grosbeak: another problematical grosbeak sighting that does not sit very well with me. The description of the underparts is suggestive of a Black-head but is not detailed enough to be conclusive (the observer should have mentioned the belly and described the streaking pattern in more detail). The white eye line is suggestive of a Rose-breast. In addition, the observer was not familiar with the species and appeared rather indecisive with her own identification. Given these facts, I don't think this written description provides a conclusive basis for identifying this bird to either species.

Whooping Crane: I have a number of problems with this sighting. First, the fact the observer was a non-birder who observed the bird at a distance of 100 yards without binoculars makes me wonder about the accuracy of the description (could he accurately determine bill and leg color at that distance?). Secondly, the crane he described was a first-year bird that should still be accompanying its parents (by the way there were only 2 or 3 young produced last year out of the 70 or so cranes in the Aransas flock). Thirdly, it is rather unlikely that this species would be feeding along the shore of a man-made lake. Lastly, I invariably receive 1 or 2 Whooping Crane reports from somewhere in the Region each year (I also received 1 from Indiana this spring). These reports always come from casual or non-birders in very unlikely locations. While it is conceivable that an occasional crane might stray into extreme western Iowa or Missouri, such a sighting must be thoroughly described by a number of active birders (and hopefully accompanied by photos) before I will accept it.

Western Grebe: the description is pretty good for a light-phase bird. The best field mark is the head pattern which he described perfectly (white lores and white extending above the eye). The bill color is a little troublesome; light-phased grebes have orange-yellow bills while dark-phase birds have greenish-yellow bills. However, the description of a "bright yellow" bill is closer to a light-phase bird. Another characteristic that is frequently useful is back color. Light-phase birds have a grayish back that is lighter than the nape (as was accurately described for this bird); dark-phase grebes have uniformly black upperparts and nape. The best article describing these color phases is found in Western Birds (1981, Vol. 12 (1), pp. 41-46); I can send you a copy if you're interested.

Eastern Wood Pewee: very marginal description (so marginal that I probably won't include it in my report). I have problems with any pewee described as a black and white bird (the upperparts certainly aren't black and the underparts aren't uniformly white). In addition, Empidonax flycatchers frequently lack eye rings. Given this brief and inaccurate description and the observers' apparent inexperience, I would have to describe this sighting as questionable at best.

Gray-cheeked Thrush: another questionable sighting. The rusty tail of a Hermit can be rather difficult to view (especially for young birds in poor light). They also failed to mention the gray cheek patch. Given their inexperience, this sighting would best be treated as Catharus sp.

Several miscellaneous comments on some observations:

Yellow Rails: while the descriptions seem to come out of a field guide, from my experience, Yellow Rails look nothing like those pictured in the books. For example, they are not yellow at all but have cream-colored underparts and tan or buffy upperparts with rather indistinct dark streaks. If Iowa observers are seeing yellow-colored rails, I do not know what they are looking at.

Long-billed Dowitcher: basic plumaged long-bills cannot be identified by bill length and wing covert edgings!!!! I would suggest Mike Newlon read Pitelka's excellent monograph on the genus Limnodromus (1948, U. California Publ. Zool. 50: 1-108) before he attempts further identifications of dowitchers. While fall juveniles and breeding plumaged adults can be safely identified with caution (don't use the misinformation in the field guides), winter plumaged birds in migration cause real problems. I don't know of any proven field identification techniques for these dowitchers. (This letter is too long already, I will defer further discussion until October). Many birders are having similar problems. This spring, one state in the Region reported more long-bills than short-bills which is preposterous.

Godwits: I totally agree with your comment on godwit identification. Any May sighting of 46 godwits in this Region must certainly be Hudsonians.

than call notes

Tom Kent
June 21, 1983
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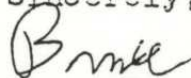
I have several requests:

1. Can you send me a better copy (or the original) of the Chestnut-collared Longspur documentation? I can't read the copy you sent me.
2. Can you send me a photo of the Vermilion Flycatcher? While a Vermilion Flycatcher should be unmistakable, there was a partially melanistic Scarlet Tanager in New York this spring that had a plumage pattern identical to a Vermilion Flycatcher (and was originally identified as one until someone familiar with both species saw the bird).

I will return both the photo and original ^{longspur documentation} promptly. I will feel more comfortable including both sightings in my spring report if I can study the available evidence in better detail.

I hope this information is useful to you. (I also hope it makes sense; it is getting quite late and I should have gone to bed long ago). Let me know if I can provide further assistance.

Sincerely,



Bruce Peterjohn

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

83-22
IIIWhat species? Western Grebe How many? 1Location? Cone Marsh (Louisa County).Type of habitat? Marsh; open pond.When? date(s): 5 May 1983 time: 1430 to 1530Who? your name and address: James P. Sandrockothers with you: James G. Huntington

others before or after you: _____

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.

The bird was significantly larger than Pied-billed Grebe; Eared Grebe; and Horned Grebe. Bird rode low in water, revealing slate-gray back; long neck which was white in front, but very black on back. The black of nape extended over head to form a black cap which covered top of head and extended down face to just above red eye. The black of neck and cap contrasted starkly with shining whiteness of throat and lower face; white of face extended just slightly above eye. Bill was bright yellow, long, and sharply pointed. The gonys was long and, of course, tapering--there was some white discernible between bill and eye. Wings, belly, legs, and feet could not be observed. Tail appeared very short when bird dived. Breast was white which extended up throat. From rear the black head appeared to be triangular in shape. No sound heard from bird. Diving behavior typical of Podicipedidae. Many dives were timed; the longest dive lasted 65 seconds; the average dive lasted 35 seconds.

Similar species and how eliminated:

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? No.

If yes, explain:

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

Overcast (no shadows); 100 yds. (estimated); 7 x 35 binoculars; 20x-40x zoom scope.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: No experience with this species; have seen all other grebes on Iowa Check List.References and persons consulted before writing description: None.How long before field notes made? On site this form completed? 6 May 83

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240