

Tricolored Heron

4 May 1991

IPL Ponds, Pottawattamie Co., IA

*Janet Greer

IBL 61:89, 62:70, Greer 1992

Record Number: 91-01

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION:

Janet Greer, 341 Steven Circle, Council Bluffs, IA 51503

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:89

Records Committee: IBL 62:70

Greer, J. G. 1992. Tricolored Heron in Pottawattamie County.

IBL 62:88.

VOTE: 6-A-D, 1-NA

A-D, a very well described and detailed Tri-colored Heron, quite acceptable.

A-D, Excellent detailed description which eliminates Great and Little Blue Herons.

NA, I can not eliminate Am Bittern as a possibility from the description given. 1) There is no mention of a long neck which should have been apparent in a 1+ hr view at these distances. 2) The neck was described as mottled rusty and white with long rusty feathers on the breast, seems to fit Am Bittern better than the narrow white neck front of Tricolored. 3) The large feet and long time on the ash flat are more Am Bittern like than Tricolored Heron like. 4) The primaries and secondaries of the Am Bittern are dark contrasting strongly with the brown/rusty back and wing coverts.

A-D, Janet, you put together an excellent and convincing documentation. Interesting account of behavior. It appears nesting hormones were beginning to kick in on this sub-adult bird.

A-D, The rusty coverts, scapulars, and neck indicate a first-year bird. Good description of head and bill. White underparts diagnostic.

A-D, The combination of slate blue upper surface and white belly and chin clinches this record as a Tricolored Heron. This bird should be somewhere in or between Basic I and Prealternate I plumages (Palmer, Handbook of N.A. Birds, Vol. 1, 1962). There apparently should not be any rusty wash to the mantle. The front of the neck was not specifically mentioned. No rump color was noted as well as color of tail. The shape of the bill and overall body shape was not noted either. The main field marks were seen and described well enough to be beyond doubt though.

A-D, A good documentation with lots of good details. What an interesting bird to see with its sub-adult plumage!

REVOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, I disagree with some of the points raised by the NA. First, American Bittern would never show the slate blue flight feathers or 'stark white' underparts mentioned by the observer; American Bittern is primarily a brown bird. Second, I disagree that standing in the open on fly ash for over an hour is typical of bittern behavior. In addition Ms. Greer mentions twice in her

documentation that this bird at times exhibited 'bittern-like' behavior which indicates to me that she is aware of the characteristics of Am. Bittern. Lastly, I have known Jan for over 20 years (In fact, she was one of the people most helpful to me when I began birding), and have birded with her on numerous occasions. I know from personal experience that she is not only experienced but extremely cautious in her identifications. She has indicated to me (pers. comm 31 Dec 91) that her clearest memory of this bird was 'its long neck snaking out of the bush' and that her intention was to eliminate the species she felt most likely to be mistaken for Tricolored Heron -- Great Blue Heron.

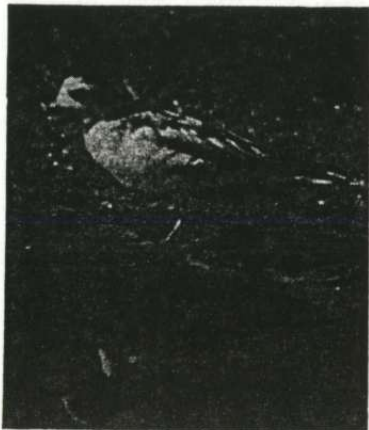
A-D, A heron with stark white belly and chin, bi-colored bill, and slate blue upper surface could not be an American Bittern.

NA, The field mark that I find inconsistent with any plumage of Tricolored Heron is the topside during flight. It is described as having a definite demarcation between the rusty washed mantle and the blue colored primaries and secondaries of the wing. The publications I have show adults with all blue topside and immatures with mixed rusty and blue areas. I am also not familiar with the mottled rusty neck as a Tricolored Heron characteristic. Since, I can't definitely eliminate Am Bittern from the field marks given I am voting NA awaiting further details, in particular neck shape and length, and whether or not the head was point up or held horizontal at rest.

A-D, Diagnostic marks include the white belly and slate blue flight feathers. Am. Bittern is not white below, has easily seen streaks, has black outer wing (not confined to flight feathers), has yellow legs, has no feathering on legs, and would not be compared to Great Blue Heron. For Janet Greer to mistake a bittern for a heron is inconceivable to me.

A-D, White belly, white chin, slate blue primaries and secondaries clearly eliminate American Bittern. The color on the breast, mantle and upper wing coverts was described as rusty and not brown as an American Bittern would have, again, clearly eliminating American Bittern and any other species.

A-D, The details provided are very convincing for a Tricolored Heron. I do not think this bird could be an American Bittern. The description indicates a Tricolored Heron.



Red Phalarope, Saylorville Reservoir,
28 Sep 1991. Photo by Tim Schantz



Red Phalarope, Saylorville Reservoir,
28 Sep 1991. Photo by Tim Schantz

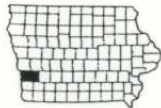
tail. It had a very noticeable light-grayish back. Its relatively short bill was very thick, stout, and black. It had a very black crown and a strong black bar through and behind the eye. In flight, it had a very distinctive wingstripe. This bird appeared to be almost into its basic plumage. The bird was running along the shore, later flew around, landed in the water off shore by a fishing boat, stayed there for a while, and then was gone. Based on its plumage differences, it was probably a different bird from the two reported earlier in the fall.

P. O. Box 65, Liscomb, IA 50148

TRICOLORED HERON IN POTTAWATTAMIE COUNTY

JANET G. GREER

On 4 May 1991, Marge and Dutch Graf, Mary Jo Harlow, and I were participating in the Audubon Society of Omaha spring count. Upon our arrival at the Iowa Power and Light settling basins at 11:30 a.m., I noticed a medium-sized heron in the water near the rushes bordering the shore. It shortly flew away from the car, and I noted a stark white chin, slate-blue primaries and secondaries, and a rusty wash to the mantle and wing coverts. These characteristics convinced me that this bird was a Tricolored Heron.



The heron landed on the far shore of the settling basin and turned to face us. The entire belly and the upper part of the legs were stark white. The white extended up the flanks to the bend of the folded wings. As noted above, the chin was white in contrast to the dark of the entire face and crown. The long thin neck was mottled with rusty and white feathers. In addition, there were long rusty feathers on the breast. At the closest observation (75 feet), the distal one-fourth of both the upper and lower

mandibles appeared to be a different color than the base of the bill. The straight bill appeared long in proportion to the size of the bird. The legs, feet, and bill were a dark slate color. The bird appeared smaller than a Great Blue Heron, also present, although the two species were never side by side. At this time, the heron flew out of our range of vision.

We drove around the basins and relocated the heron standing on the fly-ash flat where we observed its behavior for almost an hour. The bird struggled to pick up a straight stick more than six feet long and carried it around over a large area of the fly ash. Several times the stick was dropped and picked up again. On several occasions, the heron approached a dead bush and shook it vigorously with its bill. After this, the bird would gently pick at the bush, thrusting its head at it. Often the heron stopped to scratch itself about the shoulders and neck with its foot. The bird was always active but it never approached the shore or resumed fishing while we watched.

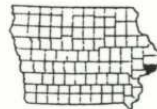
We left the settling ponds to inform other birders about this bird but it was not relocated that afternoon nor on subsequent days. This is the second record of Tricolored Heron for Iowa and the first from the Missouri River Valley. The first was at Cone Marsh on 29 April 1989 (Kent, T. H., *Iowa Bird Life* 61:1-4, 1991).

341 Steven Circle, Council Bluffs, IA 51503

SECOND-YEAR GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

THOMAS H. KENT

On 14 January 1991, Jim Fuller found a dark-mantled gull on the Mississippi River in Bettendorf/Moline waters and reported it on the Birdline as a possible Lesser Black-backed Gull. On 15 January, Dick Tetrault and I found a dark-mantled gull there. Compared to Herring Gulls in the same field of view it was 30% larger, much darker backed, longer and thicker billed, longer legged making the bird stand taller, thicker legged (twice as thick as Herring Gulls), and longer winged in flight. It had a long-necked, slender-headed, long-billed appearance. The bill was straight and mostly black with poorly demarcated light areas in the proximal one-third. The head and neck were white with dark eye, slight streak through the eye, and touch of gray on the posterior crown. The under parts were unstreaked white. The legs were a slightly darker pink than those of Herring Gulls. On the standing bird, the wings and back appeared rather uniform black-brown with indistinct feather edging. The primaries and tail band were black. The tertials and posterior scapulars were light gray, producing marks on the standing bird. In flight, the base of the tail was white and a terminal black band, which was indistinct proximally and thicker centrally, occupied about one-fourth of the tail. The outer primaries and their coverts were black, and I did not see any mirrors. The inner primaries, secondaries, coverts, and back were dark brown with thin feather edging. The trailing edge of the wing was pale. The underwing appeared medium neutral gray.



On 17 January, Jim Fuller saw the bird at closer range and recorded basically the same features. Other observers on the 15th and 16th recorded a gull with similar features but smaller in size. These observers came to different conclusions on the bird's identity; Western and Lesser Black-backed gull. On 7 and 8 February, Steve

91-01

SPECIES AND HOW MANY: One sub-adult Tri-colored Heron (Near adult with retention of some features of juvenile plumage)

LOCATION: Iowa Power and Light settling ponds, Council Bluffs, IA

TYPE OF HABITAT: lakeshore

DATE: May 4, 1991 TIME: 11:30 AM to 12:40 PM

NAME AND ADDRESS: Janet Greer, 341 Steven Circle, Council Bluffs, IA 51503

OTHER OBSERVERS WITH ME: Marge Graf, Dutch Graf, Mary Jo Harlow

DESCRIPTION: I first noticed an erect heron facing me from the rushes at the edge of the lake. The bird had a stark white chin. It immediately flew away from the car. As the bird flew, I saw slate blue flight feathers and a rusty wash to the mantle and the wing coverts. There was a definite demarcation in these two colors. The primaries and secondaries were the blue color and the back and the rest of the wings were the rusty color.

The bird landed on the far shore of the cove and turned to face us. The entire belly and the upper part of the legs were stark white. The white extended up the flanks to the bend of the folded wings. The chin was stark white, in contrast to the dark of the entire face and crown. The rest of the neck was mottled rusty and white. There were long rusty feathers on the breast. At closest observation, the distal one-fourth of both the upper and lower mandibles appeared to be a different color than the base of the bill. During the longest observation at the greatest distance, I was not able to see this again clearly. The straight bill appeared long in proportion to the size of the bird. The legs, feet, and the bill were a dark slate grey. The feet appeared very large, also, in proportion to the rest of the bird. The bird appeared to be smaller than a Great Blue Heron viewed two minutes later. The two herons were never side-by-side for size comparison.

BEHAVIOR: The heron was in lake water in front of rushes when first approached but was immediately alert. No fishing behavior was observed. When he flew away to a near shore, he turned to face us as if to look us over. There was an almost bittern-like behavior in his observation of us. The bird, after a few minutes observation in this place, flew away, and was spotted again a few minutes later on the fly ash flats. The bird never again approached the water during almost an hour's observation. During this time, the bird busied himself with a straight stick of more than six feet in length. The bird would struggle to pick up the long stick and then carry it around over a large area of the fly ash flat. Then the stick would be dropped only to be picked up again later. On the fly ash flat were dead bushes. The bird would approach a bush and shake it vigorously as if trying to uproot it. After several such efforts, it would subside and gently pick at the bush, thrusting its head at various parts of the bush. Often the bird stopped to scratch itself about the shoulders and neck with its foot. Often it would stop still and look at us in a very bittern-like stance and then resume its activities with the stick and the bushes. The bird was never really still during the hour's time we observed it on the fly ash flat except when it apparently was observing us.

SIMILAR SPECIES AND HOW ELIMINATED:

Great Blue Heron: Eliminated by bill color, rusty feathers on the breast, white belly and leg color, and dark face and crown.

