

Middlewestern Prairie Region
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Cattle Egret 2. Number: 1

3. Location Lake by I-29 right after Plattsmouth exit

4. Date: Aug 22, 1974 5. Time Bird seen: 4:00 to 4:30 PM

6. Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field):

a large white bird - a little larger than a green Heron but smaller than an American Egret, rather chunky & more thick necked than other Egrets I'd seen. It was all white with a definitely yellow bill & yellow legs & feet which were easily seen with the telescope. Bird was sitting on a post in a marshy lake - then flew to a field to the east across ~~the~~ I-29 & by a farm and granery there

7. Description of voice, if heard: not heard

8. Description of behavior: Sat quietly on post for about 20 min - then flew to a field across I-29 by a farm over there

9. Habitat - general: Small marshy lake
specific: a lake along I-29 beside a corn field - some mud flats & marshy areas along the edge

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:

Snowy Egret would be larger & have black bill & black legs
Common Egret would be larger with longer, thinner neck & have black legs
immature Little Blue Heron would be larger, thinner & longer neck, dark-tipped bill which would look dark even if light was wrong for it to be bluish & legs would be more greenish - not bright yellow

11. Distance (how measured)? about 500 ft (estimated in terms of city blocks)

12. Optical equipment: Bushnell 7x35 binoculars and Bushnell zoom telescope

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): Sunny - Sun behind us as we faced East - good light on the bird showing all field marks clearly - light shining on the bird - sky clear - weather warm & calm

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: I had not seen this species before but have seen many Common Egrets in Neb., Iowa, & Calif & several Little Blue Herons in Neb and at Cheyenne Bottoms in Kansas

15. Other observers: Ruth Green

16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Ruth Green

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:

Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds & Birds of North America by Robbins, Braun & Zim. We had both memorized the field marks of this bird & were both familiar with similar species. We used the books to confirm our identification & carefully checked each part of the description while watching the bird thru the telescopes. We recorded each detail of the above description at the time of observation while we were looking at the bird.

Signature

Address: 915 S 69th St

Date: Nov 22, 1974 City, State: Omaha, Neb 68104

If you watch birds solely for your own enjoyment, there really is no need to describe your observations in writing. But, if you have seen something unusual and want to share this experience with others, a written description is essential. It is true your immediate friends who know and respect your ability probably will accept your report without question, but what about those who do not know you, particularly the bird students 100 years from now who cannot know you? Also, what about the habitual skeptics? And most importantly, what about the compilers of regional bird lists who probably will insist that records be scientifically sound? All these critics will investigate your observation not because they assume you are wrong, but merely because they ordinarily expect verification. Whether the individual demanding verification realizes it or not, in doing so, he is employing a basic rule of the scientific method.

If your observation involves a common species during a season of abundance, verification is achieved simply by returning there again in season. If, however, the observation involves a rare species, or a common species out of season, verification is not obtained easily and special documentation is necessary. The best documentation is a collected specimen, and many bird students insist this is the only acceptable evidence. However, others recognize the importance and reliability of sight records accumulated by the experienced field observer, and maintain that even extraordinary sight records are acceptable if accompanied by an adequate verifying description.

It must be emphasized that a request for documentation is not an affront, but an effort to perpetuate a record by obtaining concrete evidence which may be permanently preserved for all to examine. This procedure is required for every extraordinary observation irrespective of the observer.

It should also be pointed out that with the great photographic equipment now available, species identification from photographs are possible. Such species documentation are highly desirable and should be sent to the state editors or to large museums.