

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Western Grebe 2. Number: one
3. Location Trumbull Lake, Clay County
4. Date: 5 June 1980 5. Time Bird seen: 8:30 to 8:40 p.m.
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):
Large, long-necked swimming bird. Appeared larger (noticeably) than coots and Lesser Scaup that were near it. Basically it was dark above and light below on the head, neck and body. Neck was very long and slender as was the bill. It was too far away to see the red eye.
7. Description of voice, if heard: none heard
8. Description of behavior: swimming, didn't see it dive
9. Habitat - general: open water area of a large lake that is fringed with cattail & bulrush
specific:
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
Common Loon- bill too thin, neck too long and slender for a loon
the break between dark and light plumage was quite distinct rather than
the gradual merging you often see in winter plumage loons
11. Distance (how measured)? estimated 200 yards 12. Optical equipment: 20 X
spotting scope
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
light 90° to side of bird and fading but still good enough to see the bird well
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
Have seen this species several times in the past year in Iowa and North Dakota, including
15. Other observers: Ed Miller a bird at this same spot last year.
who has taken ornithology from me.
16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: none
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
Robbins et al.
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 6 days

Signature

James J. Dinsmore

Address: Dept. Animal Ecology, Iowa State Univ

Date: 11 June 1980

City, State: Ames, Iowa 50011

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.

11. Distance (how measured)? estimated 300 yards

12. Light (day, night or bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you)? light 90° to side of bird and fading but still good enough to see the bird well

13. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species? Have seen this species several times in the past year in Iowa and North Dakota, including a bird at this same spot last year.

14. Other observers? Ed Miller who has taken omnibones from me.

15. Did the others agree with your identification? Yes

16. Other observers who independently identified this bird: none

17. Notes, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description?

18. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 5 days

Address: Dept. Animal Ecology, Iowa State Univ.

City, State, Area, Iowa 50011

Date: 11 June 1960

Signature: [Handwritten Signature]