

White-tailed Kite
13 May 1991
near Norwalk, Warren Co., IA
*Ann Johnson
IBL 61:91, 62:71

Record Number: 91-04
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION: Ann Johnson, 523 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211

REFERENCES

- Field Reports: IBL 61:91
- Records Committee: IBL 62:71

VOTE: 5-A-D, 2-NA

- A-D, Field marks seem to be all described well enough to accept this document.
- A-D, Convincing detailed description.

NA, It seems to me that the described jist of this raptor eliminates all birds, but N. Harrier and Kites. Mississippi Kite is eliminated by dark tail and generally gray underparts and Swallowtailed Kite by forked tail. Elimination of male N. Harrier is much harder, there seems to be conflicting information and the dorsal view was not seen. The following is a discussion of the noted characteristics and how they relate to male N. Harrier and Black-shouldred Kite: 1) The jist a few wing beats an long glides is more like N. Harrier than the exspected buoyant wing beats and short glides of kites. 2) White head is more characteristic of the kite, but from below the whitish forehead, throat, and eye areas of N. Harrier can give a whiteheaded appearance from below. 3) The underwing primary and secondary pattern as described is that of the Black-shouldered Kite, however the primary and secondary pattern of a male Harrier would be similar with less contrast between the white upper wing coverts and the dark colored grayish primaries and secondaries. 4) The black carpal spot is the strongest ID point for the Black-shouldered Kite. I can not imagine a black carpal patch on a Harrier. 5) The yellow leg would be present in both, but speak to the fact that the observer saw the bird fairly good at least. 6) The patagial stripe should have been noticeable and visible from the underside but was not mentioned.

A-D, Good yard bird. And finally, an unimpeachable record of this species in Iowa.

NA, I vote NA because I would like to see further review and discussion of this record. The identification appears plausible and I find nothing that would refute it. However, the upper parts and details of the head were not seen. My experience with this species is that it is relatively easy to get a good look at and it often hovers (the only kite that does). Although this species, over the last 20 years, has increased up the Pacific Coast to Oregon and Washington and along the Gulf Coast to Florida, there are still very few records north away from the coasts. Midwest records include IL (9 May 1987, possible same bird as WI), IN (18 Apr 1981), MO (14 Jun 1976), ND (22 Sep 1987), NE (31 Aug 1983), WI (6 Jun 1964, 15 May 1987). There are very few records for OK, AR, NM, WY, SC, and NC, and only single records for NV, UT, ID, MT, VA, NY, and MA (old). Almost all of these records are of birds that were seen well by many or photographed. Thus, although this species has expanded in the last 20 years, records outside its normal range are few, even in nearby states. There are two ways of approaching the current record: "What else could it be?" and "Was it seen adequately to be beyond doubt?" Another way of asking the later question might be, "If this were a first sighting within the normal range, would one add it to one's life list or wait to see one better?" Should one rely on a strongly suggestive (diagnostic?) field mark (black spots on underwing)? Can the reviewers judge how certain the observer was that this was a kite? I cannot answer these questions, so would leave this record as "probable" rather than "certain." I think the committee should review the previous record of this species also.

A-D, Combination of slight dihedral (mostly) soaring flight pattern, white head, white tail and lower surface of body, dark primaries, slate gray secondaries, white wing linings, black carpal spots and yellow legs rules out any other species.

A-D, Good details in this documentation about size, shape, coloration, and flight pattern conclusively determine this to be a Black-shouldered Kite.

REVOTE: 4 A-D, 3 NA

A-D, While this may not be the definitive Black-shouldered Hawk sighting from Iowa due to distance and viewing conditions, the field marks described (white head, tail and underparts, slate gray primaries, black carpal spot on wings, and general shape, and size of bird) have convinced me. In addition, I believe the observer was aware of, considered, and eliminated other possibilities including Northern Harrier which may be the most likely bird to be confused with this kite.

A-D, We seem to be dealing with the somewhat nebulous question of what constitutes a pattern of vagrancy here. Two sightings in Iowa? One sighting in the upper Midwest? Consider Gargary record which I presume will pass this committee. One reviewer found 7 records in what I would call Upper Midwest, and this with no question about possibility of aviary birds. The same reviewer found seven Black-shouldered Kite records in the same area, yet in this case, the possibility of established vagrancy is questioned. Black-shouldered Kite is expanding its range, and this is the time of year in which a vagrant or overmigrant would be expected to occur. The focus of this discussion should involve the field marks and whether they were seen well enough to confirm the record. Unfortunately, it was a flyover. However, diagnostic marks were noted. The black carpal patches, described as distinctive by the Peterson Hawks guide were well described. The head was white, eliminating all plumages of Harrier, as did the pale, unmarked tail. Neither Harrier nor Osprey would show the nearly straight trailing edge of the wing, a useful observation. Mississippi Kite is ruled out by tail color. One observer raised the question, "what else could it be?" The answer is "nothing."

NA, The black carpal spot on each wing is the only diagnostic field mark reported. The other field marks and just are much more subjective, but do not refute Black-shouldered Kite. The vagrancy pattern of the Black-shouldered Kite shows very limited pattern of vagrancy outside its established range. The permanent range is expanding, but the vagrancy pattern is not. In summary the lack of multiple diagnostic marks and a very restricted vagrancy pattern, especially in the upper midwest, prevents me from accepting this record as a certain Black-shouldered Kite, and therefore I am voting NA on this record.

NA, I think we should err on the conservative side for such an unlikely species only seen from below briefly by one observer.

NA, After further consideration of the details of the documentation and the comments of the NA reviewers, short time of observation, no view of dorsal part of bird, possible effect of light on bird and vagrancy patterns for this part of country I think a more conservative approach is warranted here and I am changing my vote to NA. This should be considered a probable Black-shouldered Kite at this time. I agree with one NA reviewer that the previous record of this species should be re-reviewed as per records committee procedures based on the same criteria considered in changing my vote to NA on this record.

A-D, Convincing and diagnostic details for this bird were provided. The one reviewer who voted NA on the first round stated that it may be a male Northern Harrier but also states that "I can not imagine a black carpal patch on a Harrier." Many of us have seen birds briefly as they have flown away and have wished for longer, better views. That is not always possible. We need to analyze records objectively and critically but not over-critically. Not all the distinguishing field marks can be seen on every bird all the time.

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Black-shouldered Kite

Location: My home in northern Warren County, Iowa

Habitat: Agricultural area with some riparian edges

Date: 13 May 1991

Time: 6:05 to 6:07 pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: None

Description of bird: When I first saw the bird, it was circling in the northeast at a considerable distance. It had a slight dihedral but was more shallow than a Turkey Vulture. Initial impression was of a raptor with long wings and tail, not unlike a Northern Harrier. I then looked through binoculars and saw a very white head contrasting with a gray body. The bird looked very much like a large falcon with its long, pointed wings and long tail. As it glided along, the primaries were spread into fingers and the tail was spread and rounded. The bird took very few wing strokes, usually only one or two shallow ones at any given time, and primarily glided to the southwest. The trailing edge of the wing was nearly straight. Because of the height involved, it was impossible to see much of the upperparts. Even as the bird circled, it's banking was shallow enough to not be able to see the top with any detail. The underparts were easily discernible. In addition to the white head, the underpart of the body and the tail were white. The tail looked a bit grayer than the body, possibly due to backlighting, but it was unmarked. The primaries were a dark, slate gray and the secondaries were a lighter shade of gray. The wing linings were white, matching the body color, except for a black spot on each wing at the carpal area, in a bit from the leading edge. The legs were yellow. I was able to observe the bird for 1.5 to 2 minutes until it glided into the sun. During this length of time it moved nearly a mile with very little effort.

Similar species and how eliminated: Size, shape and flight pattern initially eliminated buteos and accipiters. I seriously considered both Northern Harrier and Peregrine Falcon. Until the bird got close enough to see the underparts, Peregrine was the most likely candidate based on the straight trailing edge of the wing, although I have never seen a Peregrine glide so effortlessly with few wing strokes taken. The flight pattern and white head made me aware that this was probably a kite. Of the other possibilities for this bird, all were eliminated by the white tail with no markings. Only a Ferruginous Hawk would share this characteristic. The black carpal spots on white wing linings were somewhat reminiscent of an Osprey, but other patterns, size, and flight pattern are not consistent. Although Northern Harrier males look very white from below, their heads are dark, not white, and only the outer primary tips are dark as opposed to this bird's entire primary area. The tundra race of the Peregrine Falcon would appear light colored on the head, but would also show more dark markings underneath than this bird had. Mississippi Kite looks fairly white headed at a distance, but the underparts and tail are gray.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NA

Viewing conditions (lighting, distance, optics): The sky was bright and the sun was to my back during most of the observation. I observed the bird through 7x26 binoculars at various distances, the closest being approximately 200 feet away but up in the air. I have no way of judging how high the bird was, but the yellow legs against the white body were certainly visible. Because of the bright light, I believe the backlighting made the tail seem a bit darker than the body.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have seen few Black-shouldered Kites (Texas, 1988) but have more experience with Mississippi Kites over the years. Experience with more common Iowa raptors is substantial.

References and persons consulted before writing description: Clark's Hawks, Dunne's Hawks in Flight, NGS Birds of North America, Peterson's Western Birds

How long before field notes made? As soon as the bird was out of sight, I made some notes on the description of the bird

How long before this form completed? Same evening

Description of bird: When I first saw the bird, it was flying at a considerable distance. Initial impression was of a raptor with long wings and tail. I then looked through binoculars and saw a white head contrasting with a gray body. The bird looked very much like a falcon with long, pointed wings and long tail. As it glided along, the primaries were spread into fingers and the tail was spread and rounded. The bird took very low wing strokes, usually only one or two shallow ones at any given time, and primarily glided to the southwest. The trailing edge of the wing was nearly straight. Because of the height involved, it was impossible to see much of the appearance. Even as the bird circled, its banking was shallow and in addition to the white head, the underpart of the body and the tail were white. The tail looked a bit grayer than the body, possibly due to backlighting, but it was unmarked. The primaries were a dark, slate gray and the secondaries were a lighter shade of gray. The wing linings were white, matching the body color, except for a black spot on each wing at the carpal area. It was difficult to observe the bird from the leading edge. The legs were yellow. I was able to observe the bird for 1.5 to 2 minutes until it glided into the sun. During this length of time it moved nearly a mile with very little effort.

Similar species and how eliminated: Size, shape and flight pattern initially eliminated buzzards and accipiters. I seriously considered both Northern Harrier and Peregrine Falcon. Until the bird got close enough to see the underparts, the most likely candidate based on the straight trailing edge of the wing, although I have never seen a Peregrine like so effortlessly from the wing strokes taken. The flight pattern and white head made me think this was probably a kite. Of the other possibilities for this bird, all were eliminated by the white tail with no markings. Only a Ferruginous Hawk would share this characteristic. The black carpal spots on white wing linings were somewhat reminiscent of an Osprey, but other patterns, size, and flight pattern are not consistent. Although Northern Harrier males look very white from below, their heads are dark not white, and only the outer primary tips are dark as opposed to this bird's entire primary area. The underparts of the Peregrine Falcon would appear light colored on the head, but would also show some dark markings underneath than this bird had. Mississippi Kite looks fairly white headed at a distance, but the underparts and tail are gray.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? No