

Mississippi Kite
23 Apr 1983
southeast of Cedar Rapids, Linn Co., IA
*Robert Walton
probably male Northern Harrier; IBL 54:39

Record Number: 83-01
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Robert Walton

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn, 21 June 1983 (included with review)

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 54:39

VOTE: 1-V, 6-VI

VI, Harrier not considered.

VI, Description not detailed enough, does not eliminate N. Harrier. M. Kite has black, unbarred tail.

VI, Description, behavior, and date fit N. Harrier.

VI, No. Harrier not considered, seems likely.

V, Though the bird appeared "falcon-like", and from the description didnt appear to have a white rump I vote III for male N. Harrier.

VI, Describes male N. Harrier perfectly. Kite would not normally fly low over ground. (He must have had a page missing from his field guide!).

VI, Male Marsh Hawk (Northern Harrier). The low flight and light grey color with black wing tips are typical of the Marsh Hawk. Fact the underside of the tail is banded confirms it. Marsh Hawks wings may be pointed, especially when maneuvering after prey like the starlings.

83-01
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.

can call notes

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

Tom Kent
June 21, 1983
page 3

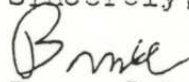
I have several requests:

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

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation
by the Records Committee
of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: MISSISSIPPI KITE

DATE SEEN: 23 April, 1983

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Linn County

OBSERVERS: Robert Walton

DATE OF REVIEW: 1983

METHOD OF REVIEW: Mailing to Committee

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: VI (see below for explanation)

COMMENTS: The Records Committee generally agreed that the description strongly suggested a male Northern Harrier (Marsh Hawk). This bird is gray, and has dark wing tips and a barred tail, the latter point eliminating Mississippi Kite adults. In April, immature Mississippi Kite would not be expected. Immature birds do indeed have a barred tail, but also have streaked underparts, a point not mentioned in the documentation submitted. Mississippi Kite also rarely flies low over the ground, as is the normal habit of Northern Harrier.

The opinions expressed here are based on the information available to the Committee and should not necessarily preclude an alternate interpretation by those who observed the bird firsthand.

Any action may be re-reviewed upon submission of additional evidence.

Explanation of Classification:

- I = labeled, diagnostic specimen, photograph, or recording available for review by the Committee
- II = acceptable sight record documented independently by 3 or more observers
- III = acceptable sight record documented by 1 or 2 observers
- IV = probably correct record, but not beyond doubt
- V = record with insufficient evidence to judge
- VI = probably incorrect identification, escapee, or otherwise unacceptable record

Classification is based on the highest category agreed upon by six of seven committee members.

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings
In Iowa

WALTON
na Howe
83-d
VI

Species? Mississippi Kite No. 1
Location 2.3 miles west of junction 218 on hiway 30 (approx. 24 miles west of Cedar Rapids)
Habitat wet cropland (corn stubble field with water puddles)
Date(s) April 23, 1983 Time: 5:15 P.M. to 5:20 P.M.
Name and Address: Robert Walton, R.R. 1, Peosta, Iowa 52068
Other Observers: Sandy Walton

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 behavior and voice. Bird was first observed on north side of "30" right of way, flying low, 4-10 ft. above ground. It crossed directly in front of car, displaying whiteish-gray body, and proceeded to make several diving passes at starlings feeding on the ground just beyond right of way on south side of hiway "30". The kite was colored an overall grayish*-white (similar to the color of an immature Herring gull). The wings on the dorsal surface were tipped with dark black. Wings of the bird were bent in falcon - fashion as it flew; tail was long, slightly notched and lightly banded on the underside.

Similar species and how eliminated: Shape and size of bird was similar to prairie and peregrine falcons. The lack of any facial markings, the grayish coloration and presence of the black dorsal wing tips eliminated the falcons.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: Excellent lighting, very clear day with no cloud cover. Bird was viewed flying parallel to hiway, 40 - 60 ft. away, crossed hiway 40ft. in front of car, and attacked starlings for several min. in adjacent corn field
Previous experience with species and similar ones: 80- 150 ft. away.

I've never observed a kite in Iowa before. I have seen falcons during migration. References and persons consulted before writing description: at Dubuque.

I checked bird's appearance with Peterson's and Field Guide to Birds of North American. I reported seeing the bird to Bob Howe (I.C.C.) and John Miller
How long before field notes made? immediately this form completed? (Dub. Aud. Soc)
one week

Mail to: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City,
Iowa 52240