

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Swainsons Hawk 2. Number: one
3. Location Winnebago County, 1 1/2 miles SE of Lake Mills (1 mile N of Rice Lake)
4. Date: 3 June 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 1:55 to 2:00
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):  
Fairly large buteo, when first seen it appeared longer and slimmer than red-tail and tail appeared fairly long-in fact my first thought was that it was a Marsh Hawk. Underparts largely white except leading and trailing edges of wings that were brown and a very definite brown patch on breast. No sign of any belly band or any hint of red on tail. Tail from below largely light colored, no definite bands on it.
7. Description of voice, if heard: None heard
8. Description of behavior: Flapping flight, then gliding with wings tipped up slightly
9. Habitat - general: mixed oak savannah with farmland  
specific: bird flew from area of oak woodlot out over farmland and circled over me
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
red tail-no belly band, no red on tail, shape seemed slimmer than most red-tails  
roughleg-no white on rump, no tail bands  
broadwing and red-shoulder- too big and no tail bands
11. Distance (how measured)? estimated 150 when right over me 12. Optical equipment: 7 x 35 binoc
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): sky clear, good midday light, light largely behind me as I had an excellent view of the bird
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: A brief glimpse of a bird at a nest a week previously, otherwise none
15. Other observers: none
16. Did the others agree with your identification?
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird:
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Robbins et al-looked at immediately after seeing bird
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 3 days

Signature

James J. Dinsmore

Address: Dept of Animal Ecology

Date:

12 June 1978

City, State:

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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.