

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Merlin (Falco columbarius) 2. Number: 1
3. Location Brookside Park, Ames, Story County, Iowa
4. Date: 20 March 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 08:45 to \_\_\_\_\_
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):  
pointed wings, long prominently barred (black and white) tail, larger than a kestrel
7. Description of voice, if heard:
8. Description of behavior: flying fast about 150' high, darting some (being chased by a flock of starlings)
9. Habitat - general: park near Iowa State University  
specific: deciduous woods with many trails - flew over Squaw Creek
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
kestrel - too large for a kestrel  
sharp-shinned hawk - it had more pointed wings
11. Distance (how measured)? estimated about 150' above us 12. Optical equipment: 7x35 binoculars
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):  
cloudy sky, sun to southeast, bird flying northward
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:  
I watched 3 merlins at one time for about 1/2 hour in 1975. I've seen many kestrels
15. Other observers: Ornithology class (Pam Keigley, Pam White, John Hemphill, Robin Bruegman)
16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes - most not too familiar with hawks
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: none
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Robbins' Birds of North America  
didn't influence description
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 3 hours

Signature

Ellen Johnson

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Date: April 28, 1978

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.