

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Surf Scoter 2. Number: 1
3. Location Little Wall Lake, Hamilton County, Iowa
4. Date: 18 Nov 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 1100 to 11:15 a.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):  
Medium sized duck-larger than Ruddy, about the size of scaup (Greater?), both of which were with the bird and could be compared in the field. Bird appeared mostly dark, no sign of white on wing, even when it raised up in water and flapped wings. It had two white areas on the side of the head, one in front and one behind the eye. Bill appeared heavy, especially at base.
7. Description of voice, if heard: none heard
8. Description of behavior: Mostly swimming, occasional dive. Once rose up in water and flapped wings
9. Habitat - general: fresh water lake  
specific: open water near center of lake
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
Most ducks-general dark color and the heavy bill  
White-winged Scoter-no white on wing  
Black Scoter-head not "two-toned" (dark above, light below)
11. Distance (how measured)? estimated 300-400 yards
12. Optical equipment: Bushnell scope-used 20 X
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): Heavy cloud cover, some light fog but it did not interfere with my view of bird. Was looking toward sun but cloud cover kept sun from being a factor. Generally fair viewing conditions
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:  
Have seen ~~xxxx~~ all scoters in the field, both in Alaska and off east coast. Have also ~~xxx~~ used study skins of birds in this plumage in course on waterfowl I teach so I recognized the
15. Other observers: Steve and Mark Dinsmore bird at once.
16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Gary and Nancy Fredricks, both former students in my ornithology class
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Robbins et al. used in field
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 4 hours

Signature

Address: Dept. Animal Ecology, Iowa State Univ.

Date: 21 November 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.

16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Gary and Nancy Fredrick, both

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description?  
Hobbs et al. mentioned in field

19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 4 hours

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