

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

- 1. Species Surf Scoter
- 2. Number of birds: one
- 3. Location Princeton Marsh, Ill County: Scott
- 4. Date: May 15, 1986 5. Time bird seen: 6:40 AM to 6:55 AM
9:45 AM to 10:00 AM CDT
3:45 PM to 4:00 P.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):
Large duck, plumage black except for head. Large white area on back of head, ^{very} small area on top, bill orange + white with black spots, eye white. Feet not seen.
- 7. Description of voice, if heard: silent
- 8. Description of behavior: diving in early morning, swimming only later visits
- 9. Habitat - general: Pond near Mouth of Wapsipileon R, 1 mi. from Miss R. Channel
specific: central pond, west edge of Princeton Marsh state wild/life area.
- 10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
Black scoter - no white on head
Whinge scoter, has white on wing, no white on back of head.
- 11. Distance (how measured)? 120 yds, 1st obs, 250+ yds other viewings - est.
- 12. Optical equipment: 15-60x60 scope used 25-40x, 10x binoculars.
- 13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
1st viewing, heavy o.c. poor light, 2nd brighter but still o.c. 3rd cloudy, sun behind obs.
- 14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
have seen in Atlantic + Pacific, once previously in Iowa.
- 15. Other observers: Don Moellen, Corey Blevins, Gil Sandvick, Mary Lou Peterson, Ann Borke
- 16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes
- 17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: John Hoogerhede - he located on 5/14
- 18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
Nat. Geog. Guide, Robbins, Peterson & Master guide checked prior to viewing to get field marks in mind. This did not influence description.
various,
- 19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? written 4:30 on 5/14

Signature: Peter C. Peterson Address: 235 McClellan Blvd

Date: 5/15/86 City, State: Davenport, IA 52803

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.