

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Swainson's Hawk 2. Number: two
3. Location along highway 59, 6 miles south of intersection with highway 9, or 4 miles north of Melvin, in Osceola County
4. Date: 9 June 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 3:30 to 3:40
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):
One bird seen only sitting on nest and only part of head seen. Other bird flew out from cottonwood tree and landed in cornfield, then flew back to cottonwoods. A buteo, about the size of redtail, no sign of red on tail, no belly band, underparts largely light except for brown on breast and dark on front and trailing edges of wings
7. Description of voice, if heard: none
8. Description of behavior: one on nest, other flew out, circled briefly and then landed on ground
9. Habitat - general: Open farmland with nearly all row crops. Nest was in a small grove
specific: of cottonwoods (large trees) around a farm. Trees had no underbrush and was almost parklike
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
redtail-no red, no belly band
roughleg-no bands on tail
broadwing & red-shouldered - size and no bands on tail
11. Distance (how measured)? 100 yards (est) 12. Optical equipment: 7 x 35 binocs
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): clear sky, good light behind me so I had good views
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
Saw one at nest and a second bird within the past month.
15. Other observers: Tom Nigus, ISU Grad student
16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes (this nest has been seen earlier by others including Dean Roosa so we weren't the first to see it)
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird:
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
Robbins et al
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 3 days

Signature Jan J. Dinsmore Address: Dept. Animal Ecology
Iowa State Univ
Date: 12 June 1978. City, State: Ames, Iowa

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.

Address: _____
City, State: _____
Date: _____