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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species American Magpie - Pica pica hudsonia 2. Number: 1
3. Location Tyson Bend, 4 mi. west of Modale, Harrison County, Iowa
4. Date: 10/14/74 5. Time Bird seen: 5:30 p.m. to 5:31 p.m.
6:20 p.m. to 6:21 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):
Observed at times mentioned above a bird larger than robin size. Color patterns while sitting was black with white on lower breast, and white on wings. The beak was black but feet coloration was not determined. While flying, observed the long tail and white patches on wing.
7. Description of voice, if heard: A 5 single syllable distinct call
8. Description of behavior: Was perched in treetop and watched me. Later saw bird flying into some trees - apparently to roost overnight.
9. Habitat - general: Wooded area of Missouri River flood plain
specific: A series of cattail marshes interspersed with willows and cottonwoods.
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6,7 & 8, Explain:
None - the only bird I am familiar with that is black and white and has a long tail.
11. Distance (how measured)? 40-45 yards (estimate) 12. Optical equipment: None
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
Bright, no cloud cover. While facing bird, the sun was directly behind me.
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
Term paper on Corvidae family, 3 mo. nesting study for ornithology class at Colo. St. Univ.
15. Other observers: None
16. Did the others agree with your identification? N/A
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: N/A
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
Not consulted because of previous knowledge and familiarity of this species.

Mr. Lutz
Edward W. Lutz Address: RR-1, Box 112
Signature
Date: November 25, 1974 City, State: Missouri Valley, Iowa 51555

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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.