

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Western Kingbird 2. Number: 1

3. Location Iowa, Story County; T84N, R24W, sec 30; ISU Beef Farm

4. Date: 11 May 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 0940 to 0942

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):

A medium-sized passerine, perching with a "typical" tyrannid flycatcher silhouette (sort of "hunched over" looking). Bright yellow abdomen with a white chin and breast. Dark mask on the face, grey head. When it flew away from me he fanned the tail, which was black with white outer tail feathers against a greyish back.

7. Description of voice, if heard: Not heard

8. Description of behavior: Flew in and perched in a tree for ~2 minutes, then flew toward the creek.

9. Habitat - general: In a wooded pasture with a creek running through.  
specific: Along the creek in a single locust, above a brush pile. Scattered trees nearby, open wooded pasture. Farmland adjacent (plowed).

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:

Cassin's kingbird - does not occur this far northeast and lacks the white outer tail feathers, has a white chin and dark breast  
Myiarchus flycatchers do not have black tails.

11. Distance (how measured)? 30 meters (estimate)

12. Optical equipment: 7x35 binocs.

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): High haze, somewhat indirect sunlight. The sun was on my back, shining on the bird.

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: Have seen eastern kingbirds several times; had never seen a Western kingbird before.

15. Other observers: None

16. Did the others agree with your identification? -

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

Peterson A Field Guide to Western Birds

Used for confirmation

19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 3 hours

Patricia A. Heagy  
Signature

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Date: 11 May 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.