

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Western Kingbird 2. Number: one

3. Location along east shore of Anderson Lake, Hamilton County (near Jewell)

4. Date: 15 May 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 8:45-9:00 to

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):

Seen in field with about 6 Eastern Kingbirds. Was slightly larger in size, had characteristic kingbird shape with slight crest, upper parts distinctly gray and lighter in color than the Eastern Kingbird, the under parts very definitely a sulphur yellow in color *white outer tail feathers? (NSH)*

7. Description of voice, if heard: not heard

8. Description of behavior: sat on ground, then flew up about 3 ft in air to flycatcher just as the other kingbirds were doing

9. Habitat - general: sitting on ground in freshly plowed field  
specific:

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:  
Compared directly with Eastern Kingbird, back gray, not brown so couldn't be Great Crested

11. Distance (how measured)? 75 yards (estimate) 12. Optical equipment: 6 x 35 binocs 20 x scope

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): overcast and not too bright but still fair light and sun behind us. Had a good view.

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: Have seen it numerous times in western states

15. Other observers: Mark Ryan, Ellen Johnson (grad students in ornithology) and 15 undergrad students in ornithology class

16. Did the others agree with your identification? yes

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Mark Ryan and virtually all the students once they had seen the bird

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Robbins et al. All the students had this with them to use to identify the bird in the field

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

Signature Jane J. Dinsmore Address: Dept. Animal Ecology, ISU

Date: 15 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.