

Red Phalarope

6 Sep 1996

Union Slough N.W.R., Kossuth Co., IA

*Ann Johnson/Jim Bangma

IBL 67:22, 81

Record Number: 96-50

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

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REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:22

Records Committee: IBL 67:81

VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, The thick bill is diagnostic for separation of this species from other phalaropes and, in fact, all three are separable by silhouette. Although the distance made confirmation of back streaking difficult, the residual red on the throat would not be found on Red-necked. The constant movement of birds makes it quite likely that all three species of phalaropes were present but not necessarily visible at the same time.

A-D, The bill, back, and retained red are convincing. Too bad Red-necks were not documented. Alternate plumage is lost quickly from August to mid-September (Prater et al. 1977).

NA, Description is confusing. 'Grey back' suggests adult bird, but a grey-backed bird with a 'band through the eye' could be a Red-necked. "Residual" reddish on throat and upper foreneck could also be molting ad. Red-necked. Bill shape is suggestive. Juveniles of these 2 species are very similar, but appear to be eliminated by 'grey back'. Date early for Red Phalarope, also suggests adult. Color of bill base not noted. Descriptions of Red-necked and Red are difficult--need careful description of feathering for ID. Bill shape subjective. No size comparison.

RE-VOTE (by mail): 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, Thick bill, reddish throat, and no back stripes described eliminate Red-necked Phalarope.

A-D, The bill shape and plumage characteristics are convincing.

A-D, Short and thick bill should eliminate red-necked.

A-D, The statement that "there was a black band through the eye" indicates nothing more than that the bird was a phalarope. The bird is described as showing residual red on the throat and upper foreneck. While red on the foreneck could indicate Red-necked or even Wilson's, the presence of red in the throat rules out these species. In all plumages Red-necked shows pale striping on the back (buffy to orange in breeding adults and juveniles, whitish in basic plumaged birds), formed by the outer edges of the scapulars and mantle feathers. The report states that this feature was specifically looked for and not seen. The back of a basic adult Red Phalarope is plain gray. While the bill can be subjective, a statement by an observer familiar with both

birds that the bill was "relatively short (and) thick" can be a valid secondary character indicating Red Phalarope. Basic-plumage Red Phalarope can show a variable yellow base to the bill. In some cases this is confined to a slight yellow tinge to the base of the lower mandible. One need only to review the photographs in the Master Guide or Stokes Guide to see how invisible this can be, if in fact it is present in all birds. The fact that this feature was not observed in no way rules out Red Phalarope.

A-D, Time is ok for basic adult. If bill and back are described correctly, that seems to be enough. This bird is definitely not a juvenile because of red on underparts. Alternate plumage is "lost very quickly in August/mid-September" (Prater, A. J., J. H. Marshant, and J. Vuorinen. 1977. Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders), which fits this bird perfectly. There is an Iowa record of a bird in basic plumage on 4 August 1986 (Dinsmore 1966; IBL 62:86-87). Red Phalaropes have been seen in the interior in all months except February with the most records from September to November (Kent and Dinsmore 1996). I don't understand the NA voter's reservation about the date.

A-D, Red-necked Phalarope would have no red on throat as this bird had. Relatively short, thick bill eliminates Red-necked also. These marks are diagnostic for Red Phalarope and are beyond doubt.

NA, A-D comments do not answer my primary problem with the date of the record and not very convincing description.

DOCUMENTATION FORM
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA

Species: Red Phalarope

Location: Union Slough NWR, Kossuth Co., Iowa

Habitat: Shallow marsh at north end of refuge

Date: 6 September 1996 **Time:** 5:00 pm **Length of observation:** 5 minutes

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, IA 50211
Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Ave., #8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

Other Observers: None

Background: This was our last stop of the day before heading for the IOU meeting. As we pulled up to the area, there were a number of shorebirds including Stilt Sandpiper, dowitchers, and a Wilson's Phalarope. The birds seemed to be moving somewhat and as we periodically scanned, one of us would find something different. On one scan there was a phalarope near where the Wilson's had been and the first thought was that fatigue had taken over. The Wilson's had transformed into a gray bird with a short, stout bill. (Incidentally, we did relocate the Wilson's later tucked into a corner.)

Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics): The sun was still fairly high in the sky over our left shoulders. Distance was an estimated 100 yards. Observation was through a Spacemaster Jr. with 20X eyepiece and B&L Discoverer zoom.

Description of bird: The bird was approximately the same size as the Wilson's Phalarope and was gray above and white below. The most immediate distinguishing characteristic, especially from this distance, was the relatively short, thick bill. The face was primarily white but there was a black band through the eye. The gray of the back extended up the back of the neck but did not reach the crown. With the zoom scope, we looked carefully for back streaking and saw none. We did, however, observe some residual red coloration on the throat and upper foreneck. As we watched the bird, it did a bit of typical phalarope spinning.

Similar species/discussion: Wilson's Phalarope looks much lighter, does not have the black eye patch, and has a long, thin bill. Red-necked Phalarope is superficially similar but the bill is much more needle-like. Furthermore, Red-necked has the gray extending further onto the crown, shows white streaking on the back, and would not have remnants of red color on the throat and upper foreneck.

Previous experience: Both have 30+ years of birding experience. Bangma sees Red Phalaropes regularly on the East Coast. Johnson has seen several, both inland and on each coast.

References consulted: Nat. Geo guide