

Whooping Crane

10 Apr 1983

N. Jersey Ridge John Deere Plant, Scott Co., IA

*Fred J. Lorenzen

IBL 54:39

Record Number: 83-03

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION:

Fred and Ted Lorenzen (dictated to PCP by phone)

Fred J. Lorenzen

LETTER: Bruce Peterjohn, 21 June 1983 (included with review)

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 54:39

VOTE: 2-III, 2-IV, 2-V, 1-VI

III, What else? Russet color not on egrets nor dark wing tips. I am bothered by size quoted--how determined.

V, Probability of lone juvenile Whooping Crane is extremely low, so need multiple experienced observers or photos.

IV, Unlikely bird at unlikely place. Description fair, but from a distance, and may not rule out White Ibis or Wood Stork (both equally unlikely). On the other hand, what big, long-legged, white with black primaries bird is left? Description leaves it unclear as to whether head and neck were outstretched when flying or just at landing.

IV, Obs. not birders, but experienced hunters. Some points differ from phone comments made on day of observation.

VI, A hard vote to make. Nevertheless, observers were non-birders seeing a species of ultimate rarity. What these two saw is still unsettled in my mind.

V, Date OK, possibly early for egrets. Description suggests young bird if indeed Whooping Crane. Hard to believe estimates of size. "Large white neck and head" bothers me (suggests Great Egret). Overall I am not convinced--far out of range.

III, distant. May have been a crane for all that.

105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.
Westerville, OH 43081
21 June 1983

Dear Tom:

I'm looking forward to the I.C.U. meeting in October. I'll let you know about my travel plans and provide you with some slides at a later date.

My thoughts on the documentations are as follows:

Mississippi Kite: definitely a Northern Harrier

Black-legged Kittiwake: definitely a first-year Ring-billed Gull!
The absence of head and nape markings, bill color and tail shape eliminate the possibility of a kittiwake.

Laughing Gull: the description does not eliminate a sub-adult Franklin's Gull (which would have a similar wing pattern with no white separating the gray mantle from the black primaries.) Since she did not describe bill and leg color or the black hood in detail, I cannot accurately age this bird (and hence cannot identify it to species). Given its location in extreme western Iowa, I would imagine that a Franklin's would be much more likely.

Black-headed Grosbeak: another problematical grosbeak sighting that does not sit very well with me. The description of the underparts is suggestive of a Black-head but is not detailed enough to be conclusive (the observer should have mentioned the belly and described the streaking pattern in more detail). The white eye line is suggestive of a Rose-breast. In addition, the observer was not familiar with the species and appeared rather indecisive with her own identification. Given these facts, I don't think this written description provides a conclusive basis for identifying this bird to either species.

Whooping Crane: I have a number of problems with this sighting. First, the fact the observer was a non-birder who observed the bird at a distance of 100 yards without binoculars makes me wonder about the accuracy of the description (could he accurately determine bill and leg color at that distance?). Secondly, the crane he described was a first-year bird that should still be accompanying its parents (by the way there were only 2 or 3 young produced last year out of the 70 or so cranes in the Aransas flock). Thirdly, it is rather unlikely that this species would be feeding along the shore of a man-made lake. Lastly, I invariably receive 1 or 2 Whooping Crane reports from somewhere in the Region each year (I also received 1 from Indiana this spring). These reports always come from casual or non-birders in very unlikely locations. While it is conceivable that an occasional crane might stray into extreme western Iowa or Missouri, such a sighting must be thoroughly described by a number of active birders (and hopefully accompanied by photos) before I will accept it.

Western Grebe: the description is pretty good for a light-phase bird. The best field mark is the head pattern which he described perfectly (white lores and white extending above the eye). The bill color is a little troublesome; light-phased grebes have orange-yellow bills while dark-phase birds have greenish-yellow bills. However, the description of a "bright yellow" bill is closer to a light-phase bird. Another characteristic that is frequently useful is back color. Light-phase birds have a grayish back that is lighter than the nape (as was accurately described for this bird); dark-phase grebes have uniformly black upperparts and nape. The best article describing these color phases is found in Western Birds (1981, Vol. 12 (1), pp. 41-46); I can send you a copy if you're interested.

Eastern Wood Pewee: very marginal description (so marginal that I probably won't include it in my report). I have problems with any pewee described as a black and white bird (the upperparts certainly aren't black and the underparts aren't uniformly white). In addition, Empidonax flycatchers frequently lack eye rings. Given this brief and inaccurate description and the observers apparent inexperience, I would have to describe this sighting as questionable at best.

Gray-cheeked Thrush: another questionable sighting. The rusty tail of a Hermit can be rather difficult to view (especially for young birds in poor light). They also failed to mention the gray cheek patch. Given their inexperience, this sighting would best be treated as Catharus sp.

Several miscellaneous comments on some observations:

Yellow Rails: while the descriptions seem to come out of a field guide, from my experience, Yellow Rails look nothing like those pictured in the books. For example, they are not yellow at all but have cream-colored underparts and tan or buffy upperparts with rather indistinct dark streaks. If Iowa observers are seeing yellow-colored rails, I do not know what they are looking at.

Long-billed Dowitcher: basic plumaged long-bills cannot be identified by bill length and wing covert edgings!!!! I would suggest Mike Newlon read Pitelka's excellent monograph on the genus Limnodromus (1948, U. California Publ. Zool. 50: 1-108). before he attempts further identifications of dowitchers. While fall juveniles and breeding plumaged adults can be safely identified with caution (don't use the misinformation in the field guides), winter plumaged birds in migration cause real problems. I don't know of any proven field identification techniques for these dowitchers. (This letter is too long already, I will defer further discussion until October). Many birders are having similar problems. This spring, one state in the Region reported more long-bills than short-bills which is preposterous.

Godwits: I totally agree with your comment on godwit identification. Any May sighting of 46 godwits in this Region must certainly be Hudsonians.

can call notes

Tom Kent
June 21, 1983
page 3

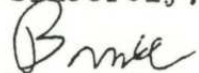
I have several requests:

1. Can you send me a better copy (or the original) of the Chestnut-collared Longspur documentation? I can't read the copy you sent me.
2. Can you send me a photo of the Vermilion Flycatcher? While a Vermilion Flycatcher should be unmistakable, there was a partially melanistic Scarlet Tanager in New York this spring that had a plumage pattern identical to a Vermilion Flycatcher (and was originally identified as one until someone familiar with both species saw the bird).

I will return both the photo and original ^{longspur documentation} promptly. I will feel more comfortable including both sightings in my spring report if I can study the available evidence in better detail.

I hope this information is useful to you. (I also hope it makes sense; it is getting quite late and I should have gone to bed long ago). Let me know if I can provide further assistance.

Sincerely,



Bruce Peterjohn

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: WHOOPING CRANE

DATE SEEN: 10 April, 1983

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Scott County

OBSERVERS: Fred J. Lorenzen

DATE OF REVIEW: 1983

METHOD OF REVIEW: Mailing to Committee

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: V (see below for explanation)

COMMENTS: The Committee was somewhat puzzled by this record. On one hand, there are few large white birds with black wingtips showing in flight. The evidence submitted, ^{indicated} that the observers were familiar enough with these types of birds to be able to recognize a Whooping Crane. On the other hand, however, the available evidence was not enough for the Committee to be sure that the bird seen was indeed a Whooping Crane. Problems revolved around: 1. the actual size of the bird (difficult to estimate with a lone bird); 2. the details submitted suggested a young bird, with russet coloring on the head, but production of young in 1982 was very low (2-5 birds); ~~3.~~ the extremely low probability that a Whooping Crane would occur this far east of its normal migration route.

This, as implied by the observers, would have been a perfect case for a photograph!

The opinions expressed here are based on the information available to the Committee and should not necessarily preclude an alternate interpretation by those who observed the bird firsthand.

Any action may be re-reviewed upon submission of additional evidence.

Explanation of Classification:

- I = labeled, diagnostic specimen, photograph, or recording available for review by the Committee
- II = acceptable sight record documented independently by 3 or more observers
- III = acceptable sight record documented by 1 or 2 observers
- IV = probably correct record, but not beyond doubt
- V = record with insufficient evidence to judge
- VI = probably incorrect identification, escapee, or otherwise unacceptable record

Classification is based on the highest category agreed upon by six of seven committee members.

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

LORENZEN

83-03

Y

What species? Whooping Crane How many? 1Location? John Deere Property, Scott Co., No. Jersey Ridge.Type of habitat? Man-made lake, with open farm country around it. No trees or brush.When? date(s): April 10, 1983 time: 11 A.M. to 11:05 A.M.Who? your name and address: Fred J. Lorenzen, 1621 Marlo Ave., Davenport, Iowa 52803others with you: Ted Lorenzen, Jr., 1621 Marlo Ave., Davenport, Iowa 52803.others before or after you: Not known

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Weather: cloudy, overcast, gray-type day, with threat of rain:

Large white bird, standing approximately 6-6½' tall, with legs in water. Legs were either dark brown or black; bird had long white neck and head, with dark (again black or very dark gray) bill. When bird flushed, the wing tips (primaries) immediately showed black; bird was viewed from the side at first as it flew south, and then from the rear as flew west, to opposite end of lake. Bird did not have crown; bird's head faintly marked or streaked with russet coloring. Bird did not make any sounds. Bird was observed approximately 100 yards from road right-of-way, when first sighted (it was wading along the shoreline of lake). ~~MM~~ Bird's wing-spread approximately 7'. In flight, bird's neck and head went straight out as ~~MM~~ it lowered to land in the SW corner of lake.

Note: Both observers have over 30-years experience hunting, fishing, and observing wildlife (birds, animals, reptiles, etal) in Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

Fred J. Lorenzen was, for 21 years, Outdoor Editor of the Quad-City Times.

(PS-That's the largest white bird I have ever seen in my life! - Fred J. Lorenzen).

Similar species and how eliminated: Definitely not a swan, snow goose, or white pelican, as observers have seen all of those, at various times.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? Not to observers knowledge.

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

~~MMMMMM~~ Lighting, fair, despite overcast day; 100 yards, visual estimate; ~~MM~~ no optical equipment available (I wish there had been such!!).

Previous experience with species and similar ones: very familiar with cranes & egrets, after 25-years experience fishing the Upper Mississippi River country.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Pete Petersen and Myron Speer, local conservation iffcer.

How long before field notes made? immediately this form completed? 16-days.

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

83-03

What species? Whooping Crane How many? 1Location? just E. of Davenport John Deere Plant N. of IFO + N. ofType of habitat? small lakeWhen? date(s): April 10, 1983 time: 10:45 to 10:50 AMWho? your name and address: Fred & Ted Lorenzen 1621 Marlow Ave., Davenport, Iowa 52803

Others with you: _____

Others before or after you: (gone by 11:45 P.M. - P.C.P. + M.L.F.)

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Large, long legged bird. 5-5.5' tall, ^{Plumage} creamy white, head dark, ^{grayish brown}
 Upon take-off, 6-7' wing spread, black-tipped wings, ^{grayish brown}
 long neck extended when flying. Legs dark, black to choc. brown,
 bill dark. Bird flew away from obs. & across down lake
 before landing. silent.

Note-obs. long time hunters, quite familiar with all waterfowl. - P.C.P.
 Smaller species and how eliminated: G. Egret - black wing tips, Am. White
 Pelican - long legs, Sandhill Crane - white plumage, Swan - long legs.

Did any see disagree or have reservations about identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
overcast, flushed from 125-150 yards, no binocs.Previous experience with species and similar ones: Had seen sandhill cranes + G. B. Herons,References and persons consulted before writing description: none - dictated to P.C.P. by placeHow long before field notes made? 4 hrs this form completed? 4 hrs.