

Black-headed Grosbeak
23 Nov 1982
2 mi. east of Elkhart, Polk Co., IA
*Dean Mosman
IBL 52:124; 53:36

Record Number: 82-35
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Darwin (Dean) Mosman

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn to Tom Kent, 21 Dec 1982

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 52:124
Records Committee: IBL 53:36

VOTE: 2-III, 4-IV, 1-III?

III, late date puzzling for Rose-breasted.

IV, can't tell if hybrid.

IV, I could be talked into a III, but agree with Peterjohn that all possible field marks should be included. We need more study of this species, especially we need specimens.

IV (regretfully), ID prob correct but doc a bit lacking.

'Head-pattern similar to female Rose-breast' too undetailed.

III?, Needs more discussion. Possibly at Shenandoah we can grapple with the lot.

III, Together with comments by Peterjohn appear to be Black-headed, poss first yr male. I'm not sure it couldn't be a hybrid, however.

105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.
Westerville, OH 43081
Dec. 21, 1982

Dear Tom:

While not impossible, female Pheucticus grosbeaks are certainly some of the more difficult passerines to identify. My biggest problem with most documentations I receive is that observers only describe the underparts and ignore the rest of the bird. It is very difficult to analyze these sightings based on incomplete descriptions. For all unusual female Pheucticus grosbeak reports, the entire bird should be described. I cannot emphasize this fact enough.

Separating the two species (and hybrids) utilizes basically the same field marks at all times of the year. However, observers should note that birds in worn plumage (either late summer or late winter) can become faded and may lose some of these characteristics. When identifying female grosbeaks, the following characteristics should be noted (listed in their order of importance):

1. Underpart pattern: Breast color (distinctly orange-buff in Black-heads, a dirty buffy-white in Rose-breasts while the hybrids would have traces of both colors)
 Streaking (Rose-breasts are uniformly and heavily streaked with dark brown, Black-heads are normally unstreaked except for some fine streaking along the sides of the breast while hybrids have intermediate streaking patterns (finer streaks than Rose-breasts but more extensive streaking than Black-heads))
 Contrast with belly (on Black-heads, the belly is distinctly lighter and yellower than the breast while Rose-breasts lack any contrast between breast and belly)
2. Head pattern: The browns tend to be darker (a dark chocolate brown) on Black-heads than on Rose-breasts (more medium brown). Rose-breasts have white or buffy-white eye lines while they tend to be yellow on Black-heads. This field mark is variable. While white or yellow eye lines may be useful characteristics, buffy eye lines are problematical.
3. Rump color (best visible in flight): Black-heads have a greenish rump that appears noticeably lighter than the remainder of the upperparts; Rose-breasts have rumps quite similar to their upperparts.
4. Wing linings: Black-heads have pale yellow (lemon yellow) wing linings while Rose-breasts have darker yellow or yellow-orange wing linings. These linings are hard to see well and require comparative experience with both species to really be useful.

One additional comment; on winter birds, the immature males of both species should start their pre-nuptial molt by late winter. Some individuals may start this molt a bit earlier (the timing of this molt has not been extensively studied). Observers should be careful to look for nuptial plumage characteristics on any winter bird.

An excellent description of Rose-breasted Grosbeak plumages and its molt sequence is found in Roberts "A manual for the identification of the birds of Minnesota and neighboring states". Unfortunately, I am not aware of a similar description of Black-headed Grosbeaks nor do I know of any articles that satisfactorily deal with this identification problem. The 1974 article in the Wilson Bulletin (Vol. 86, No. 1) contains some useful information but is difficult to use unless you are able to examine a number of specimens.

My thoughts on the 4 female Black-headed Grosbeak reports in Iowa during 1982 were as follows:

- #1. 10 May 1982 at Amana Woods: based on underpart streaking, I would lean towards a hybrid although it is difficult to say in the absence of other field marks.
- #2. 14 July 1982 in Dickinson Co.: I can't identify this bird with certainty and treated it as Pheucticus sp. His description of the underparts is ambiguous (there weren't any heavy streaks but he didn't say it was unstreaked). The white facial stripes are closer to a Rose-breast rather than a Black-head.
- #3. 29 July 1982 near Decorah (I presume you received this report; Jeri McMahon said she was going to send it to you): Probably a Black-head based on underpart color and the lack of streaking although other characteristics would have been useful.
- [#4. 23 Nov. 1982 near Elkhart: Probably a Black-head based on the observed characteristics (especially the orangish-buff streaks on the back. This field mark indicates the bird was most likely a first-year male. Rose-breasts never have these streaks in any plumage).

One warning about grosbeak identification (for both sexes). Occasionally, one observes aberrant birds that are not characteristic of either species. These birds should not be identified in the field. (We had such a bird in Ohio last year. All I can say about it is that I think it may have been a male grosbeak; I have no idea which species.) Hence, I am suspicious of birds that are not completely typical of one species of the other.

I hope this information is useful to you.

Sincerely,


Bruce Peterjohn

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: Black-headed grosbeak, female (*Pheucticus melanocephalus* ♀)

DATE SEEN: 11-23-82

SITE OF OBSERVATION: 2 mi E of Elkhart, IA

OBSERVERS: Dean Mosman (RR1 Box 112A, Elkhart, IA), Mike and Diane Mosman

DATE OF REVIEW: 2-22-83 (mail vote); 4-23-83 (discussion + re-vote).

METHOD OF REVIEW: mail vote followed by discussion and re-vote.

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: IV

COMMENTS: The Committee regrettably concluded that it could not conclude whether this bird was a Black-headed Grosbeak or a hybrid Black-headed x Rose-breasted Grosbeak, on the basis of the information available. Certainly the late date is atypical for a Rose-breasted. (Bruce Peterjohn has a good article on this very difficult identification problem in Iowa Bird Life, March '83, pp 22-23.)

We would like to thank you for sending the record to us.

Mike Newton

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.

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species BLACK-HEADED GRASBEAK (FEMALE) 2. Number: 1
 3. Location 2 M.E. ELKHART, IA.
 4. Date: 11-23-82 5. Time Bird seen: 7:15 A.M. to 7:30 A.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):

The size of a HARRIS' SPARROW only plumper. IT HAD fine STEAKING ON SIDES AND A LITTLE ON UPPER BREAST, THE COLOR ON SIDES AND BREAST WAS A LIGHT ORANGE-YELLOW, THIS COLOR COULD ALSO BE SEEN IN THE STEAKING ON ITS BACK. THE HEAD COLORATION WAS THE SAME AS A FEMALE ROSE-BREADED GRASBEAK.
 7. Description of voice, if heard:
 8. Description of behavior: AT BIRD FEEDER
 9. Habitat - general: IN WOODED AREA
specific:
 10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:

FEMALE ROSE-BREADED GRASBEAK ONLY SPECIES CLOSE TO SAME APPEARANCE. NO VOICE HEARD, BEHAVIOR AND HABITAT THE SAME. COLOR AND STEAKING ONLY DIFFERENCE
 11. Distance (how measured)? 30 Feet. 12. Optical equipment: 7X35 EXNOC'S
 13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): OVERCAST
 14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: FIRST SIGHTING OF THIS SPECIE. BUT F. ROSE-BREADED SEEN SIX YEARS
 15. Other observers: MIKE MOSMAN, DIANE MOSMAN
 16. Did the others agree with your identification? YES
 17. Other observers who independently identified this bird:
 18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:

BIRDS, OF NORTH AMERICA, BY ROBBINS, ORLSON AND ZIM, PETERSON FIELD GUIDE

I HAD TO USE THESE FOR FINAL IDENTIFICATION SINCE I HAD NEVER SEEN THIS SPECIES BEFORE.
 9. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 1 hour
- Dean Mosman Address: RR 1 Box 112A
Signature
Date: 11-23-82 City, State: ELKHART, IA.