

Black-headed Grosbeak
14 May 1996
Des Moines, Polk Co., IA
*Jim Fuller
IBL 66:107; 67:83

Record Number: 96-25
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll NE, Iowa City 52240

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 66:107

Records Committee: IBL 67:83

VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, Comparison with female Rose-breasted seems adequate for describing female Black-headed.

NA, A 30-second view of a female grosbeak revealed a tawny brown breast, yellow brown eyeline, and, presumably, non-bold streaking on the breast. Was there breast streaking or not? I am reluctant to accept female grosbeaks based on such limited study and under circumstances that involve so much preconditioning. I find it difficult to judge descriptions of colors. A dark tawny brown breast without streaking could be an immature male Black-headed Grosbeak, while a light tawny brown with light streaking could be a female or immature male (in fall) Rose-breasted Grosbeak. It seems to me that at a minimum we should have a more quantitative description of the amount and thickness of breast streaks, a description of streaks or lack of them in the center of the breast, and bill color. On the other hand, maybe we should require photos or specimens for identification of female grosbeaks.

A-D, (Note: Do we need to require that the observer see and adequately describe the yellow underwing coverts)?

A-D, Adequate description of female Black-headed Grosbeak.

REVOTE: 3 A-D, 4 NA

A-D, The lack of any bold streaking on the breast is diagnostic. The yellow-brown eyeline also suggests Black-headed Grosbeak. A description of bill color would have been useful.

A-D, I think the tawny yellow brown breast with fine non-bold streaking eliminates Rose-breasted Grosbeaks.

NA, While I think this was a Black-headed Grosbeak (and believe the weather pattern just prior to this report would support the occurrence of a vagrant), I will change to a more conservative vote due to the difficulty in adequately describing the differences in Black-headed vs. Rose-breasted vs. hybrid. Females may well require a photo.

NA, no additions to my previous comment. Perhaps we should define criteria needed to accept identification of female grosbeaks.

NA, I agree with Ken Brock on this species, female plumaged birds of this species should be reviewed very carefully.

NA, The description strongly suggests hybrid character, due to

the "tawny color seemed to extend about half-way down the breast,
where it slowly became lighter". A "pure" Black-headed would be
"tawny" except for the belly area. I believe this bird was much
closer to Black-headed than Rose-breasted, however. 96-25

DOCUMENTATION OF RARE BIRD

SPECIES: Black-headed Grosbeak (Female)

LOCATION: Yard of Vern Faber, 5021 SW 16th Place, Des Moines (Polk County).

DATE & TIME: 14 May, 1996 (7:35 PM for thirty seconds).

OBSERVER: Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll, NE, Iowa City, Iowa, 52240.

OTHERS: Vern Faber

BACKGROUND: Vern Faber called the Iowa Birdline to report a male and two female birds of this species at his feeder. He also had a number of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks there as well.

DESCRIPTION: When I arrived a little before 7:30 PM, there were two male and one female Rose-breasted Grosbeaks at the feeders. I watched them for a minute or two until a dog scared them off. About five minutes later, a very different female grosbeak came flying in to the small tree close to the feeder, and perched facing me for about thirty seconds. The bird was a grosbeak, with the typical thick bill and stocky body. However, it was generally a much warmer brown color than that of the female Rose-breasted. This was most apparent on the breast, which was a rich and tawny yellow-brown color. It also lacked any bold streaking that the Rose-breasted had. The tawny color seemed to extend about half way down the breast, where it slowly became lighter. On the other hand, the Rose-breasted female that I had seen a few minutes previously, and those that I studied during the next week, all had darker chocolate brown bold streaking on an off-white breast. The dark areas on the top and sides of the head also seemed less dark than the Rose-breasted, and the eyeline was yellow-brown, as compared to a white eyeline on most female Rose-breasteds I have seen since. I could not see the underwing, as the bird turned and flew straight back out of the yard. It never did come to the feeder, and it never did appear again in the yard before dark.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Differences between this bird and female Rose-breasted Grosbeaks has been described.

VIEWING CONDITIONS: It was a misty, slight foggy evening. I was in the Faber house looking at the bird about 20-25 feet away with Swift Audubon (8.5 X 44) binoculars.

REFERENCES & FIELD NOTES: Field notes were made immediately after returning to the car, at which time I also looked at the National Geographic field guide. Mr. Faber had showed me the picture in the Golden field guide. This form was typed on 23 April.