

Black-headed Grosbeak

9 May 1983

a mile south of Marble Rock, Floyd Co., IA

\*Pearl Knoop

IBL 54:40

Record Number: 83-09

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Pearl Knoop

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn, 21 June 1983 (included with review)

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 54:40

VOTE: 4-IV, 3-V

IV, Not enough to really tell.

V, possible hybrid. Breast color--ochre-brown favors black-headed. Streaking--missing?--must discount because of doubt expressed. Contrast with belly--not mentioned. Rump color not mentioned. Head pattern--white line favors rose-breasted. Wing linings--not mentioned.

IV, Description not detailed enough to separate accurately from Rose-breasted.

V, Female grosbeaks need fine descriptions by knowledgeable observers. Knoop failed in some counts: starting with comment about breast streaking, then too we must contend with possible "hybrids".

IV, Insufficient information. Hybrid?

IV, May well be Black-headed, but not an extreme orange individual. This is probably as good a Black-headed description as we will see. Can female be identified in the field at all?

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

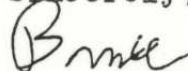
I have several requests:

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 <sup>longspur documentation</sup> 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

83-09

by the Records Committee  
of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK

DATE SEEN: 9 May, 1983

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Floyd County

OBSERVERS: Pearl Knoop

DATE OF REVIEW: 1983

METHOD OF REVIEW: Mailing to Committee

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: V

COMMENTS: The Committee felt that this bird was probably a hybrid. Points which tend to suggest this are: 1. the white eye-stripe is characteristic of Rose-breasted Grosbeak; 2. lack of information on rump color and wing linings. This is a difficult problem in Iowa. Peterjohn has an excellent summary of identification of these birds in Iowa Bird Life (March issue of 1983). Important points to note are: 1. underparts pattern; 2. head pattern; 3. rump color; and 4. wing lining color.

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.

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF  
AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD

8309  
V

1. Species Black-headed Grosbeak (female) 2. Number one
3. Location Floyd county, about a mile south of Marble Rock, along river.
4. Date: 9 / 5 / 83 May 9, 1983 5. Time Bird Seen: About 8:00 am, CD time. Observed between ~~the~~ five and ten min.
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):  
When seen I noted it as a dark bird sitting on the limb of a dead tree, not too high up for good observation. Then looked through my binoculars and discovered the lightish colored grosbeak like bill. It ~~was~~ seemed a little smaller than the rose-breasted grosbeak and back didn't have the sparrow like markings of the female of that species. Then it ~~turned~~ turned to face me and I could see the head markings, and there was more of a contrast than in the female rose-breasted. Noted especially the white streak along below the dark around the eye. ~~They looked~~ Markings looked white to me but some books say they could be yellowish. The ochre-brownish breast was what first made me realize I was looking at something different. The tail was dark but a brownish dark. I would say streaks were missing across the breast. When I studied my bird books after getting back home I wished for another look at the back, maybe I could have seen some varied markings as they describe, just took my first impression of a dark back and didn't study it ~~farther~~ farther.
7. Description of voice, if heard: Over
8. Description of behavior: She just sat there facing me most of the time but turning around some times, and I didn't get any help as she flew off across the river.
9. Habitat - general: Narrow tree and shrubby area along the Shellrock.  
This type of habitat extends along the river on both sides. More specific: bushy in some places than others. There are nearby cultivated fields and tree areas.
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8. Explain:  
Female rose-breasted grosbeak.
11. Distance (how measured)? May <sup>be</sup> 100 feet  
from base of tree, could have been more.  
(Only a guess)
12. Optical equipment: Bushnell zoom lens binoculars, Up to 20 power. They were set between 12 and 13.
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):  
Between, cloudy and clear. Light was good. I was looking northwest, so light was behind me.
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: A male seen in Texas 30 yrs. ago was rather hurriedly identified. Don't think that should count.
15. Other observers: Pearl Knoop
16. Did the others agree with your identification? No others.
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: none
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:  
Roger Tory Peterson's latest book on eastern birds and his earlier one on western birds. Birds of North America by Zim et al. Audubon's Western Bird Book by Pough. Birds of Canada by Godfrey. Etc. *Used to confirm me I had seen this species*
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? On 5th day from notes made earlier.

Signature: Pearl Knoop Address: Box 215

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ City, State: Marble Rock, Iowa



There was, at least part of the time, a sound that seemed to be coming from her location that the only way I can describe it is that it was a buzz that wasn't really a buzz. There were slight pauses in it when she was making it. I can't find it in my bird books. Neither can I find the little <sup>noise</sup> ~~noise~~ the robins make when sitting under similar circumstances. That doesn't seem to be in my books <sup>either</sup> ~~either~~. But I spent a lot of time locating the bird making it first time I heard it, which was in our town park.

*After the bird flew the noise stopped  
time*