

Vermilion Flycatcher

6 May 1983

east of Sioux Center, Sioux Co., IA

*John Van Dyk, *G. Brand, #Jan Van Dyk

also 7 May; IBL 53:47, 52; 54:38; Van Dyk 1983

Record Number: 83-08

Classification: A-P

DOCUMENTATIONS

John Van Dyk (May 6,7)

Gordon Brand (May 6)

PHOTOS

Jan Van Dyk (May 6, P-0130)

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 53:47, 52

Van Dyk, J. 1983. Vermilion Flycatcher in north-west Iowa.
Iowa Bird Life 53:58-59.

Records Committee: IBL 54:38

VOTE: 5-I-P, 1-I, 1-III

III, I like the documentation--carefully done by an observer who has seen the bird before and realizes the possibilities. Has been recorded Nebraska, South Dakota, Illinois (all in May in spring).

I, Great!

I-P, Solid for Iowa, ad extremum.

Van Dyk, J. 1983. Vermilion Flycatcher in north-west Iowa. *Iowa Bird Life* 53:58-59.

Vermilion Flycatcher in North-west Iowa — On Friday afternoon, 6 May, 1983, my nephew Mike Van Dyk, who graduated from Dordt College that morning, and I discovered a male Vermilion Flycatcher in a large open farmyard at the east side of Sioux Center. This farm area consists of a variety of habitat, including wet bottomlands transversed by a creek flowing through a fairly open stand of black willows. Broken limbs and snags are scattered throughout this wet section of the farm.

The bird did not make life difficult for observers: it perched on low snags and broken wire fences by the creek among the willows, and behaved in characteristically flycatcher fashion as it fluttered upwards to catch insects and return to its perches. Some phone calls soon brought about six additional observers who had opportunity to leisurely study, at times from distances as close as 20 feet, the bird's conspicuous and unmistakable field marks: brilliant red head and underparts, black line patch through the eye, dusky dark wings, back, and tail, and typical flycatcher behavior.

That evening a cold front moved through our area, producing heavy rain and strong winds. By early morning the rain ceased and the sky cleared, though the winds remained strong. At 6:30 a.m. Mike and I returned to the wet bottomlands of the farm and observed the bird once more at close range. But by noon it had disappeared, and we did not see it again. However, two weeks later, on Friday, 20 May, my colleague Ken Venhuizen, who lives in the outskirts at the north side of Sioux Center, called me and reported observing the flycatcher in his backyard that very morning. He described the bird in detail. There is no question that his observation and identification were accurate.

At its first appearance on 6 May the Vermilion Flycatcher was photographed by Gordon Brand, one of our best birders in this area, and by my brother Jan Van Dyk of Canada who happened to be visiting here. Complete documentation of the sighting and photographs have been submitted to Thomas Kent, field editor of *Iowa Bird Life*. — DR. JOHN VAN DYK, 736 East 1st Street, Sioux Center, Iowa 51250

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: VERMILION FLYCATCHER

DATE SEEN: 6-7 May, 1983

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Sioux County

OBSERVERS: J. Van Dyk and G. Brand

DATE OF REVIEW: 1983

METHOD OF REVIEW: Mailing to Committee

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: I-P

COMMENTS: A well-documented record for a first for Iowa. The Committee was generally enthusiastic about this exemplary record, documenting a species which was due to occur in Iowa. Well done!

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.

Vermilion Flycatcher: Documentation

I Description of the situation:

On Friday afternoon, May 6, 1983, my nephew Mike (who had graduated from Dordt College in the morning) and I were birding in the farm area a few hundred yards east of our house, at the east side of Sioux Center. This large farm area provides a variety of habitat: a section of tall trees, extensive shrub area, open fields, and in the center, surrounded by pasture land and agricultural fields, an area of wet bottomlands transversed by a creek (beaver occurs here) through a fairly open stand of tall black willows; broken limbs and snags are scattered throughout the area (see enclosed photographs).

Mike and I had just discovered a Mockingbird in this general area, a bird uncommon to rare in our part of Iowa. Near the creek our eyes fell on a small red bird perched on a snag, half hidden behind some small willows. I said to Mike: "What is that? It can't be a Purple Finch." For obviously, though the bird was similar in size to a finch, its red was of a much more brilliant fiery character. A Scarlet Tanager? The bird we were looking at was obviously too small. Just then it flitted off its perch, upwards, to catch a flying insect, then came down in full view on another snag. I could hardly believe my eyes: it was unmistakably a beautiful male Vermilion Flycatcher. Mike and I observed it for about 15 minutes, thrilled by the incredible sight. Then I left Mike with the bird and ran home to call Gordon Brand. Meanwhile, Mike's father -- my brother Jan -- came with his 35 mm Nikon to take pictures. Shortly afterwards Gordon Brand arrived, as well as some other birders whom I had called. I also called Kent in Iowa City; he was on a birding trip in Florida, but his wife would send on the message. Gordon Brand returned later in the afternoon to take pictures.

That night a cold front came through: strong northerly winds, gusting to 45 mph, accompanied by heavy rain, hit our area. By early morning the rain ceased and the sky cleared, though the winds remained strong. At 6.30 a.m., Saturday, May 7, Mike and I returned to the spot and the Flycatcher was still there, this time perched on a wire only 20 feet away from us. Later in the morning we returned to see if we could take more pictures. But the bird had left, and we did not see it again.

II Specifics:

A. Species: Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*), one individual, male.

B. Location: In approximately the center of Harry Kuhl's farm, located at the east end of Sioux Center, Sioux Co., Iowa. The specific area in which we found the bird consists of wet bottomlands with creek and tall willows and many broken branches, snags, and stumps. The bird used snags and branches near and over the creek as perch. The lighting, provided by partly cloudy skies which gradually clouded over completely as the afternoon wore on, was excellent, as the sun was largely behind us. We observed the bird from distances varying between 20_{feet} and 60 yards.

C. Date and time: Friday, May 6, 1983, 2.30 to 5 p.m.; Saturday, May 7, 1983, 6.30 to 7 a.m.

D. Optical equipment: Biboculars used by various observers ranged from 7x35 to 8x40 (my own and my son's). But at times the bird was close enough

to see clearly and distinctly without optical equipment. My brother Jan took pictures with a 35 mm Nikon, Gordon Brand used Olympus OMI, 200 mm lens, f/stop 3.5.

- E. Description: The bird was small flycatcher in size, certainly no bigger than a Pewee. The head was flaming brilliant red, with dark band from back of head through the eye to the bill. Bill thin, Empidonax-like. Underparts bright red, not quite as brilliantly red as head. Wings, tail, and entire back dusky dark. Its behavior was typically flycatcher like: from a perch relatively low to the ground the bird would flutter upwards to catch an insect, then return to its perch and quietly sit. Throughout the afternoon of May 6 the bird was actively feeding; on the morning of the 7th, after the cold front had passed through, it seemed slow and lethargic.
- F. Elimination of similar-appearing species: This category hardly applies since a male Vermilion Flycatcher is quite unmistakable. If there is any bird with which it might possibly be confused -- perhaps at great distance -- it would be a Scarlet Tanager. However, our bird was much smaller, had no red on its back, had black patchy line through its eye, had a thin dark flycatcher bill instead of a light-colored tanager bill, and behaved like a flycatcher.
- G. Previous experience: I am thoroughly familiar with Scarlet Tanagers, having lived in the East for a number of years. This is not the first time I see a Vermilion Flycatcher: I have observed them in the Patagonia area of southern Arizona, and also at various places in the Colorado Desert of southeastern California (I lived in California for three years).
- H. Other observers: Of the eight or so people who observed the bird, the following are fully competent to make correct and careful determinations: (1) Gordon Brand, a biologist and an excellent birder; (2) my brother Jan who has traveled and observed birds in North America, Europe, Indonesia, West Africa, Australia and New Zealand; currently he resides in eastern Canada; (3) my nephew Mike, an enthusiastic and careful birder, with whom I have birded in Iowa, New York, Ontario, Manitoba, and B.C.; (4) my 13-year old son John Kevin, who rushed over to see the bird as soon as he came home from school. Though still young, John Kevin already has a number of years of birding experience, has sharp eyes, and is a reliable observer.
- I. Comment: How did a Vermilion Flycatcher get here in north-west Iowa, so far out of its normal range? Here is one theory: during the past weeks strong low-pressure systems have moved through the mid-USA, creating a strong counter-clockwise airflow. This bird may have been wintering along the Gulf Coast, perhaps Florida, caught by these strong air currents and carried along the Atlantic seaboard and from there across the southern Great Lakes area towards the north-west.

For additional notes, see next page.

Note # 1: I am submitting a separate report to Mr. Petersen, to be published in Iowa Bird Life under "General Notes."

Note # 2: On Friday, May 20, two weeks after we discovered the Vermilion Flycatcher, my colleague Ken Venhuizen, who lives in the outskirts of Sioux Center at the north side of the city, called and reported that he had observed the Vermilion Flycatcher in his backyard that very morning. He described the bird in detail. There is no question in my mind that his observation and identification were accurate.

Enclosures: (1) two blown-up photographs taken by my brother Jan; (2) a slide of a photograph taken by Gordon Brand (in envelope)

Note: Gordon Brand would like to have the slide returned to him. His address:

Gordon Brand
413 Frankfort Avenue NE
Orange City, Iowa 51041

The critical components of this report (viz., section I, II B, C, E, and F) were largely written shortly after the time of the sighting, viz., May 7 and 8.

This entire documentation typed up on June 1, 1983.

Dr. John Van Dyk
736 East 1st Street
Sioux Center, Iowa 51250

Vermillion Flycatcher Sighting in NW Iowa

On May 6, 1983, I was called by John Van Dyke, a local birder, to verify the identification of a male Vermillion Flycatcher. It was actively feeding from streamside black willows in a cow pasture on the eastern edge of Sioux Center, Ia, Sioux County. The time was 3:00 pm with good lighting conditions initially but with darkening rain clouds by the time I returned with camera and telephoto lens. The enclosed slide is my attempt at recording this sighting. Though ~~detail~~ detail is muted, the general coloration pattern along with background ~~detail~~ habitat sufficiently supports this claim. The bird was unmistakably the Vermillion Flycatcher with the red head and belly, dark "eyeline", greyish back, wings, & tail. It also exhibited the typical Flycatcher behavior of dashing out from an exposed perch and quickly returning. We had several hours of close viewing and ample time to contact several local individuals and amateur birders to see this unusual sighting.

Report by Gordon Brand, Biologist. May 29, 1983