

Clark's Nutcracker
14 Oct 1972
Ottumwa, Wapello Co., IA
C. G. Ayres
to 15 Oct; P-0013, Ayres 1973

Record Number: 93-FD
Classification: A-P

PHOTOGRAPH

Charles Ayres, 15 Oct 1972, P-0013, IBL 43:14-17

REFERENCE

Ayres, C.G. 1973. First Clark's Nutcracker for Wapello County.
IBL 43:14-17.

VOTE: 5 A-P

A-P, The published photo shows a light-colored, crow-like bird with black wings, white tertials and outer tail feathers, and long pointed bill. It was banded the day after it was first seen. No further sightings are mentioned. /thk



Clark's Nutcracker P-0013
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15 Oct 1972 Charles Ayers

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First Clark's Nutcracker for Wapello County

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Early in October, 1972, Virgil Corzette, resident manager of the Forest Lake Baptist Camp located near Ottumwa, Iowa, and I had discussed the advisability of cutting down several tall, dead trees at the camp. Considering the matter we found that a total of at least 25 species of birds seemed to use the trees in which to perch or feed and so decided to let them stand. On Saturday, October 14th, we were glad of that decision.

The day started off cool and overcast and the strands of our mist nets did not show up quite as clearly as on sunny days. Fall migration was well under way and many birds were passing through on their way to their wintering grounds. White-throated and Fox Sparrows, Robins, Hermit Thrushes, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Slate-colored Juncos among other birds were making their appearances. My wife, Darleen, was banding at the time and Virgil and his wife, Jean, together with Blossom Hallberg and Eva Darbyshire, all members of the Ottumwa Bird Club, were helping her. I was doing nothing in particular, something which my wife says I do extremely well.

Suddenly Eva directed our attention to the tall trees in which several Red-headed Woodpeckers were displaying considerable displeasure at the presence of a larger bird. Closer examination revealed that it was a pearl-gray color, lighter about the face, with black wings which had prominent white patches in the secondaries. The tail was white except for two black center feathers. The bill was black and strongly built. At times the bird acted like a woodpecker as it searched for food on the trees and at other times it resembled a flycatcher, darting out for a distance of perhaps a hundred feet to catch a flying insect which it would bring back for leisurely consumption. Many times Darleen and I had seen this species of bird in the western mountains, usually at high elevations. However, to see one of them in Iowa and particularly in Wapello County was certainly a surprise. The bird was a Clark's Nutcracker, *Nucifraga columbiana* (Wilson).

Capt. William Clark, famous explorer, who was the first one to mention the nutcracker and after whom it was named by Alexander Wilson, thought the bird was a woodpecker and we observed mannerisms reminding us of that order. But it also resembled a crow though smaller and this resemblance had caused Wilson to describe it as a crow and to name it the Clark's Crow. We saw our particular nutcracker several times later in the day and on one occasion we did put up several other nets near another place where the bird was looking for food, but they produced no results as far as catching it was concerned.

The next morning, October 15th, it was even colder and the nets were covered with frost when we unfurled and pulled them down in catching position. When the nets are down we visit them at regular and frequent intervals. The first net we visited that morning on our second round caused us about as great a thrill as we had experienced when we caught the first Chuck-wills-widow to be banded in Iowa, for in that net was the first Clark's Nutcracker to be caught by a bird bander for banding in Iowa as far as we knew.

When Darleen saw it she screamed so enthusiastically that I am sure she must have been heard in Ottumwa eight miles away. In seconds she reached the net where the rare visitor rested quietly in the soft strands. Quickly she took it from the net and placed it in a bag so it would not be injured. We took it back to our temporary headquarters where we banded, examined and photographed it, all of which the nutcracker took in stride, seemingly as much interested in watching us as we were in studying it. Indeed during the time the bird was with us it gave less evidence of being disturbed or excited than have many of the Bluejays and woodpeckers we have banded and certainly its audible protests were almost nil. After attending church the Corzettes rejoined us and were as delighted as we were that this new bird had been caught. They are very proud of the camp and have a good right to be. It is not only a beautiful place but in the past three years has produced some fine banding records.

News that this new species had been caught quickly brought the members of the bird club who had been present when the bird had been seen the day before and

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in addition Pearle C. Walker, Joan Schooley, and Bernard and Florence Fulton. Neither the presence of strangers nor the lack of mountains appeared to bother the nutcracker which upon release flew to the tall, dead trees, perched for a few moments examining its newly acquired bit of jewelry, then went to work at the sensible task of looking for food. It was indeed fortunate that those dead trees had not been cut down.

One of the results which follows the seeing and banding of a new bird is that a desire for further knowledge is stimulated. To satisfy this we used some of the books in our library and learned that the nutcracker builds a thick-walled, deep cuplike nest in conifers in which are deposited from 2 to 4 greenish eggs which are spotted with gray-drab or brown. The bird is omnivorous though it seems to have a preference for pinion nuts if available and is said to eat the shells as well as the kernels.

It is apparent that some of the nutcrackers, after raising their families, move up and down the mountains on which they live and some of them wander for considerable distances. Why this one turned up in Wapello County, Iowa, we will never know. Perhaps it took off from some mountain and was caught up in a strong eastward air current or, it may have wandered in search of food. Whatever the reason - whether it was quest for food, a strong air stream, or just wanderlust - we were happy to have that Clark's Nutcracker visit the Forest Lake Baptist Camp where God's handiwork may be seen and enjoyed by so many.



First Clarke's Nutcracker Banded In Iowa
Photo by Charles Ayres