

Sage Thrasher  
20 Dec 1952  
West Des Moines, Polk Co., IA  
B. F. Stiles, E. L. Kozicky  
to 10 Jan 1953; Stiles 1953

Record Number: 81-BS  
Classification: A-D

REFERENCE

Stiles, B.F. 1953. Sage Thrasher in Iowa: a sight record. IBL 23:22-23.  
Records Committee: IBL 64:70

REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION

Tom Kent to Records Committee, 13 Sep 1993

VOTE (1981): 1-II, 3-III, 3-IV

III, strange that wing bars weren't mentioned.

IV, poor description, observer had difficulty with identification, but likely OK.

III, single observer.

IV, details of plumage scant.

IV, Single observer sight record. Seen on several occasions. Then seen on 12/27 with Kozicky (who has not filed a report). The bird is never actually described only suggested by what the observer thought it wasn't.

III, Bird well-described - observer well aware of rarity of sighting.

REVOTE (by mail 1981): 1-II, 2-III, 2-IV

III, on basis of new details and plenty of observers. [This comment seems to apply to record 2 and was so counted there./THK] nothing new

IV, not definitively described.

III, Despite some of the IV votes, the bird is well described and I see nothing wrong with this description. Stiles was very reliable.

REVOTE (1993): 7 A-D

A-D, Sounds Okay. Sage Thrashers in the mid West aren't that unusual.

A-D, Two things trouble me about this record. First, the initial identification of species such as Fox Sparrow and Gray-cheeked Thrush give the impression of a plumbish, short-tailed bird, rather than a slender silhouette of a thrasher. Second, his repeated attempts to get within "10 feet" of the bird seems to indicate that he didn't have binoculars. Not mentioning the wingbars doesn't bother me -- even the Audubon Master Guide had to include a painting because the wingbars didn't show in the photograph of Sage Thrasher. The main objection of the original committee seems to be that this was a single-observer record. I could go either way on this one... [sic]

A-D, Stiles backed into his identification, but seems to have come up with the right answer. American Pipit also fits description, but has dark eye. I agree with the Secretary's analysis and conclusion.

A-D, Stiles process of elimination and many sightings and close views makes miss ID highly improbable.

A-D, Conservative approach to identification and the number of occurrences the bird was seen lend credence to the record.

81-BS

13 September 1993

To: IOU Records Committee  
From: Tom Kent  
Re: Request for reconsideration of record

**Record:** 81-BS Sage Thrasher

**Reason for request:** Previous review did not really evaluate the evidence.

**Comment:** I really think this record was correct and would like to see if the committee in 1993 would consider that there is enough evidence. Perhaps this is not enough of a reason for reconsideration. This bird was observed over a long period of time at close range. Stiles was director of the State Conservation Commission (now the DNR) and was an active birder, although obviously not experienced with western thrashers. His presentation makes his observations sound weak, although I suspect this was a matter of style (He was also conservative about the Laughing Gull he saw). He eventually had good illustrations to compare the bird with. Add up the field marks: smaller than robin, size of Hermit Thrush, streaked breast, white in tail, long narrow bill, no red in tail, yellow eye. He didn't quite say that it was gray, but implied that in comparing it to Gray-cheeked Thrush and Townsend's Solitaire. For an old record and taking into consideration the style of presentation, I think this is an acceptable record.

Stiles, B. F. 1953. Sage Thrasher in Iowa: a sight record. IBL 23:22-23.

**Sage Thrasher in Iowa: A Sight Record.**—My biggest problems in bird identification are to keep my imagination from filling in diagnostic characteristics not present and my willingness to explain away or ignore slight points of identity that refuse to fit into the pattern. I have had these weaknesses brought home to me on more than one occasion, but there must be some perverse and unscientific little quirk to my nature that seems to insist that I do not learn the lesson easily.

On December 20, 1952, many birds were frequenting the multiflora rose hedge that surrounds my back yard. In the afternoon I saw a bird run along the ground much in the fashion of a Robin. The bird seemed too small for a Robin, but I got a glimpse of white in the tail as it alighted for an instant on a post. The next day I saw it again, this time more distinctly and for a longer period of time. It definitely was too small for a Robin. Now I could see its streaked breast distinctly, but I could not see the white that I previously saw in the tail. It flew away, and in my imagination I had about made a Fox Sparrow out of it. On seeing it again the next day I got a clear view of the bill, which was long and narrow. That ruled out any of the sparrows.

I knew that Hermit Thrushes had been recorded here in the winter, and that seemed to be most logical now. The size was about right, and I could stretch my imagination far enough to include the breast markings, but the red tail just wouldn't fit in. At about this point I was convinced that the bird was not one of our common winter birds.

On December 22 I saw it at about 10 feet and one of its tail feathers was coming out. It was askew and I knew the bird would lose it soon. What I thought was white in the tail could have been only the loose feather as it turned, exposing the under side. Now I was trying to make a Gray-cheeked Thrush out of it.

On December 27 we had our Christmas bird census, and Dr. Edward L. Kozicky, (leader of the Iowa Cooperative Research Unit) came down from Ames. We both watched the strange bird for some time but left for the trip without having identified it. It stayed around and I saw it almost every day. Many times I was able to get within 10 feet of it. Again and again I had seen white in the tail and I no longer could rule this out. Now

I was trying to make a Townsend's Solitaire out of it. This fit quite well for size and tail and general coloration, but the breast striping was just a bit off base. I wanted to check more closely on immature and winter plumage.

The next day I saw the eye in good light and at close range. It was yellow. I called Mrs. Peasley and asked her to check some plates in bird guides and she reported that the Sage Thrasher had a yellow eye. I went over my own plates and literature and certainly that was it. I went outside and checked every point carefully with the bird. It had given me a hard time of it. It was the Sage Thrasher (*Oroscoptes montanus*, Fourth edition A.O.U. Check-List).

New species for the Iowa list do not come frequently. Jack Musgrove collected a Pacific Loon three years ago and the writer collected a Glaucous Gull more than ten years ago. We added the Lewis's Woodpecker some five years earlier.

This may be the first sight record of the Sage Thrasher east of the Missouri River. Unfortunately, it was not collected. After an unsuccessful attempt on January 10, 1953, I did not see it again.—BRUCE F. STILES, State Conservation Director, Des Moines, Iowa.