

Western Tanager

8 Oct 1981

Waterloo, Black Hawk Co., IA

*R. Myers, *F. Moore

IBL 51:115, 122, 52:42

Record Number: 81-16
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Robert K. Myers

Francis L. Moore

LETTERS

Bruce Peterjohn to Thomas Kent, 22 Dec 1981

Bob Myers to Tom Kent, 31 Dec 1981

Francis Moore to Tom Kent, 9 Jan 1982

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 51:115, 122

Records Committee: IBL 52:42

VOTE: 5 III, 1 IV, 1 V

III, based on Myers documentation.

III, Myers and Moore are more convincing than Peterjohn.

V, Several points, i. e. underwing coverts and edging of lesser coverts not described, so doubt exists.

III, I agree with Myers and Moore -- the wing coverts are very suggestive of Western Tanager, and Moore saw the 'saddleback' effect.

REVOTE at meeting 8 May 1982: 6-III, 1-IV

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

81-16

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: *Western Tanager*

DATE SEEN: 8 Oct 1981

SITE OF OBSERVATION: *Waterloo*

OBSERVERS: Bob Myers, Francis Moore

DATE OF REVIEW: 1982, 8 May 1982

METHOD OF REVIEW: *mail, meeting*

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: III

COMMENTS:

The character of the wing bars and apparent 'saddle back' seen by one observer were the concerning features. A better look at the 3 zoned effect and color of the underwing coverts would have been helpful.

*mailed
5/21/82*

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.

81-16

105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.
Westerville, OH 43081
Dec. 22, 1981

#6

Dr. Thomas Kent
211 Richards St.
Iowa City, IA 52240

Dear Tom:

I have several comments with regards to the Western Tanager and Thayer's Gull sightings in your fall report. My comments are brief (due to other time constraints) but I hope clearly discuss these sightings.

Enclosed is an article on tanagers with wing bars (presence of wing bars does not eliminate Scarlet Tanager). Note that Myers described the head, back and rump as uniformly olive-green while Moore stated that the head and rump were slightly lighter than the back. Myers description fits a Scarlet Tanager while Moore's description is closer to a Western Tanager. (My experience with fall Western Tanager is that males have an obvious "saddle" effect, quite unlike a Scarlet Tanager and would have been noticed by Myers if he examined the bird closely and the bird was a male as they claim.) Since neither observer described the underwing coverts or the edgings of the lesser coverts (and their upperpart descriptions apparently conflict), their descriptions do not satisfactorily eliminate a young Scarlet Tanager with wing bars.

After carefully reviewing your photographs, my reaction is that the gull was a female Herring Gull. This identification is based on 3 main characteristics:

1. The wing tips in flight are too dark and contrast too much with the wing coverts to be a Thayer's Gull. While there are different lighting conditions on the 2 photographed birds, I really don't see any difference between them with respect to this field mark. On a typical Thayer's Gull, the wing tips are virtually the same color as the wing coverts without the distinct contrast (see *Birding*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (Dec. 1980), p. 199 for a typical Thayer's Gull).
2. Note the undersides of the outer primaries are dark (not translucent). On a Thayer's Gull, these feathers should be as translucent as the rest of the underwing (see the excellent photo on p. 205 of the *Birding* article). Notice that the undersides of the wingtips are the same for both birds (hence, they are probably the same species).
3. Female Herring Gulls have more rounded heads and smaller, slimmer bills than males (and can be very similar in appearance to a Thayer's Gull). The photographed bird has this appearance.

Without a doubt, both of these identifications are very difficult. I hope you realize my comments on these birds are offered in a purely constructive manner to aid in future identification of these species and are not meant to cast aspersions on the abilities of the observers. Let me know if I can provide further on any identification problem.

Sincerely,

Bruce Peterson

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF
AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD

81-16 #6

1. Species Western Tanager (Piranga ludoviciana) 2. Number 1
3. Location Hope Martin Park, Waterloo, Ia. (Part of Waterloo Greenbelt)
4. Date: Oct. 8, 1981 5. Time Bird Seen: 4:00 P.M. to 4:15 P.M.

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):

Bird was probably larger than English sparrow but smaller than starling - typical Tanager shape - shorter notched tail - longer bill (thick bill) - bill was light color - Bird was definitely a tanager. The question was which one.

Color Pattern - Head & back were greenish (olive) - throat, breast & belly were yellow (fairly bright - not dingy as scarlets appear) - wings and tail were black - wings had 2 bars - the upper one being wider (more of a patch) was yellowish - the lower bar was much more faint and was white - the secondaries were outlined with a fine white trim that was easily seen.

7. Description of voice, if heard: NA

8. Description of behavior: Bird was apparently feeding in flycatcher manner - flitting out and returning to branch - when I moved too close it moved to taller tree.

9. Habitat - general: Riverbottom timber on edge of park - brushy area
specific: First seen in top of willow thicket, then flew to top of oak in the park.

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8. Explain:

Fall scarlet tanager is possible - see attached page

11. Distance (how measured)? about 30' closest - checked by stepping off 12. Optical equipment: B&L 7x35 binoculars

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
Bright, clear sky - excellent light from behind me

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:

First experience with immature or winter plumaged bird (western) but have seen spring male western and many spring & fall ~~western~~ scarlet tanagers.

15. Other observers: I phoned Francis Moore and he relocated bird later that day.

16. Did the others agree with your identification? Yes

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Francis Moore

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:

See list attached

19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 1st description was made that day - this draft on Oct. 26

Signature: Robert K. Myers Address: 1236 Sylvia Ave.

Date: Oct. 20, 1981 City, State: Waterloo, Iowa, 50701

They say lightening doesn't strike twice in the same place and I'm wondering if that might apply to western tanagers and one Iowa birder for two consecutive years.

On Oct. 8, 1981 I was observing a mixed flock of yellow-rump and palm warblers feeding in a willow thicket when I saw tanager in top of one willow (about 15' high) acting like a warbler apparently chasing insects. My first thought was that this was late for a scarlet tanager and when I looked closer I saw the wing bars. My second thought was that someone told me that one of a hundred ♀ scarlets have wing bars. I also knew the Peterson Guide says some scarlets ~~males~~ have two wing bars. When I went home that night I was anything but convinced the bird was a western tanager even though most literature states wing bars = western tanager.

When I got home I phoned Francis Moore and he went to the park and was able to recapture the bird. Even though he had never seen western tanagers before, Francis thought this was one. His enthusiasm prompted me to research further. I am now also convinced that this bird was indeed a western tanager no matter how unlikely it seems. Ironically, my first western tanager, a male seen April 26, 1980 at Forney Lake, was also with a mixed flock of yellow-rump + palm warblers.

A few facts about the bird were easily noted. The bird was a tanager. This ^{was} told from shape and from my experience with tanagers. & The bird was a male - told because wings and tail were black, not gray-green as in females. The bird was most likely an immature because there was no trace of any "red" left on the face or head. The bird was dull olive green above sharply contrasting with the fairly bright clear yellow of throat, breast + belly. The bird had two obvious wing bars. The upper one, on shoulder, being wider and yellowish. The lower being thin and white. The secondary feathers were edged with a thin line of white. This characteristic is illustrated on many pictures of westerns and not on scarlets but is never discussed.

I wish I had noted any difference in color on top of head, back, and rump, but I only noted ~~the~~ olive color above.

The main problem seems to be the wing bars. Do they make a western or just a weird scarlet. Peterson, in his new guide, says some young scarlets may have two yellowish wing bars. Pough in Audubon Land Bird Guide and Roberts in Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States say that newly hatched scarlets have two faint whitish wing bars which they carry until ~~the~~ first molt (fall) which should be prior to Oct. 8.

These young scarlets are also whitish not yellow below.

All other sources I checked say simply the wing bars make the western.

The birds behavior was also atypical for a scarlet tanager. Scarlet Tanagers are, from my experience, fairly slow moving, sluggish birds. This bird was not. It would flit out, like a warbler or flycatcher, and return to some branch. It was quite active. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds - Western region says western tanager sometimes "feeds on insects, ^{often} like a flycatcher from the high canopy."

Books I used to research this bird were:

- Bull, John, The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds - Eastern Zone
- Godfrey - Birds of Canada
- Pearson - Birds of America
- Peterson - Field Guide to Birds
- Peterson - Field Guide to Western Birds
- Peterson - Field Guide to Birds of Texas
- Pough - Audubon Land Bird Guide
- Roberts - Manual of The Birds of Minnesota
- Terres - The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds
- Udvardy - The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds - Western Region

What species? Western Tanager (Piranga ludoviciana) How many? 1

Location? Hope Martin City Park in Waterloo just off of U.S. 63, N. on Ansborough Ave.

Type of habitat? 15' to 20' high willow mixed in second growth hardwood along small stream.

When? date(s): October 8, 1981 time: 4:30 to 4:40

Who? your name and address: Francis L. Moore, 264 Western Ave., Waterloo, IA 50701

others with you: None

others before or after you: Bob Myers

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior. Bird was first noticed about 40 foot up in a small hardwood tree. I immediately knew it was a tanager by its motions and the shape of its head and bill. As it flew and hopped about from limb to limb I noticed that the bird had two wing bars on each wing. The upper wingbar was wider and more conspicuous than the lower wingbar. The upper wingbar was also a pale yellow color. The lower wing bar was a white color and was more of a feather edging than the upper wingbar. The bill was pale and whitish colored. The head and rump were an olive green color and the back appeared a little darker than the head and rump. The tail was a darker olive color. Belly, breast and throat was an overall washed out yellowish green color brighter than the head and back. Bob Myers had called me earlier and said he had a different bird in Hope Martin Park so I decided to try to find the bird. The bird I found is described above and we both came to the conclusion that it was a fall plumaged Western Tanager. No song or voice was heard.

Similar species and how eliminated: Scarlet Tanager might have weak wing bars in the fall but I could find nothing in the literature to indicate that they had ~~as~~ as large an upper wing bar as this bird had.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? No

If yes, explain: N/A

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: Late afternoon sun still bright enough to see detail; approx. 20 feet to 100 feet; using 7X35mm B&L Roof Prism Binoculars.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have quite a lot of experience with Scarlet and some experience with Summer Tanagers. No prior experience with this species.

References and persons consulted before writing description: A Guide to Field Identification by Robbins, Bruun, Zim and Singer; Birds of Canada, Godfrey; Audubon Society Encyclopedia of N.A. Birds, Terres; Field Guide to the Birds, East, R.T. Peterson.

How long before field notes made? None this form completed? 4 days

copied from old form

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

Dec. 31, 1981

81-16

#6

Dear Tom,

I would like to respond to Peterjohn's comments concerning our possible western tanager in hopes that I might help the records committee in their review.

Since the presence of wingbars seems to be irrelevant, I won't dwell on this, but if the wingbars on a young ♂ scarlet look like the vague sketchy markings on the bird pictured on p. 714 in American Birds, Vol. 26, No. 4 then our bird couldn't have been a scarlet. The bars are much more distinct on our bird.

The bird's back seems to be the key feature and I really only know it was darker (olive-green color) than the breast and belly which was lighter yellow. My main attention was stupidly focused on those "irrelevant" wingbars. I did not notice if the top of the head and rump were lighter than back. In my experience, however, fall scarlets do not appear as two-tone ($\frac{\text{dark}}{\text{light}}$) as this bird did. Francis Moore's description and mine do not conflict as he saw something I did not (or did not look for).

I paid no attention to underwing coverts as the bird was not an imm. grosbeak, but I will next time if there is one.

I have no idea what these lesser coverts that Peterjohn talks about are supposed to look like. I wish I could see a photo. I only noticed the yellow patch in that area on the wing (if we're talking about the same area).

Peterjohn completely disregards the bird's behavior which I believe combined with the overall appearance and "saddle backed" back as seen by Francis still points more to a western tanager than to a scarlet.

Hope I've been of some help,

Bob Myers

81-16

#6

January 9, 1982

Dear Tom,

Thanks for the Hawk Owl photos and info, Bob shared them with me.

Bob and I decided to reply to you independently on the Western Tanager sighting and subsequent documentation by us. We have discussed the bird and Peterjohn's comments and decided to reply to you independently. I have a copy of the Audubon Field Notes describing the Western Tanager occurrence in the East. The photo in that article does not have the extensive wingbars as the bird seen by us in October. If that photo is representative of the 2% of Scarlets that have wingbars then the bird we documented was definitely not a Scarlet. All literature that both Bob and I have read does not put the wing bars in Scarlet Tanagers in the same perspective as Peterjohn. Have the wingbars in Scarlet been brought to light fairly recently or just ignored in the past by editors and authors of literature that is available for research on the subject. Anyway, the wingbars on the bird I saw were a lot wider than in the Audubon Field Notes article, whether it makes any difference or not.

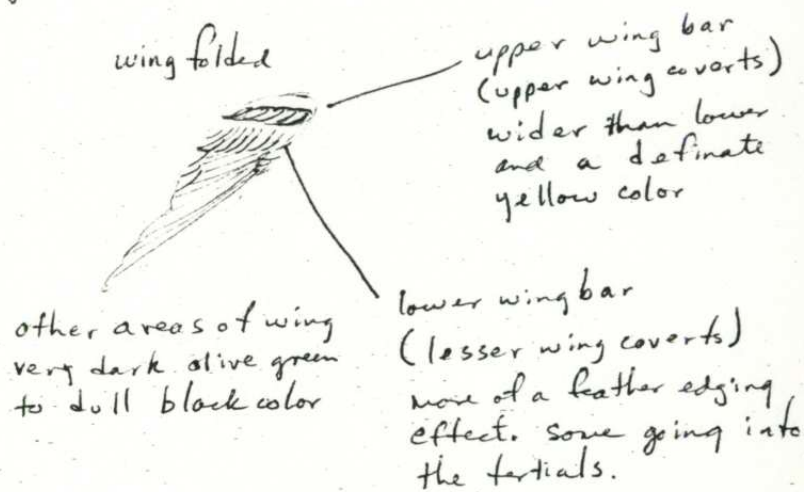
The "saddleback" appearance was noticeable to me, not as noticeable as "black and white" but ~~still~~ still noticeable. As I said in my documentation the head and rump were both an olive green color and the back was a darker color. The darker color I would describe as about 2 or 3 shades of ~~olive green~~ ^{olive green}. ~~The back was not as dark as the wings and tail~~ but still darker than the head/neck and rump.

Jan. 9, 1982
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No, I did not notice the underwing coverts because at the time I did not know that they were a key to identification between the two species. I just did not notice the underwing coverts.

I did describe the edging of the lesser coverts in my documentation as a lower wing bar and as being a white color that was more of a feather edging than the upper wingbar. This feather edging of the lower wingbar was in the lesser coverts, as I see the naming of the feathers of a birds wing.



Hopefully this information will help to clear up any doubts that you or Pet. Johnson may have on the sight record described. I am still committed to the fact that we had a fall plumage Western Tanager.

We have had many Hawk Owl observers over the past two weeks and many happy people have left our area with a new life species without having to travel to Duluth to see one. It has been quite an experience. People from St. Louis Mo., Omaha Ne, LaCross Wi, and many points in Iowa have come to see the Owl and as far as I know nobody has gone home without a very good, long look at it. Come back up, + get it on your 1982 list?!
Birds !! Edward Moore