

Ancient Murrelet  
28 Oct 1987  
Crystal L., Hancock Co., IA  
\*James L. Hansen  
IBL 58:20, 74, Hansen 1988

Record Number: 87-23  
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

James L. Hansen

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 58:20

Hansen, J. L. 1988. Ancient Murrelet at Crystal Lake. IBL  
58:59

Records Committee: IBL 58:74

VOTE: 7-III

III, The detail and feel of this description were very convincing. Not a surprising record.

III, Good description of adult, probably winter plumage, except the white eye caps not mentioned. Call was also helpful. Expected vagrant at this time.

III, Description describes Ancient Murrelet accurately. It is too bad no one else was able to see this bird or photograph it.

III, Good description seems to rule out other murrelets and other possibilities.

III, Documentor failed to note it was also looked for by Steve Dinsmore and Peter Petersen by boat the next morning without success.

III, Good description of a very rare but not unprecedented species.

III, tentatively, pending discussion at IOU meeting. I about choked when I turned the page and found a documentation for ancient murrelet. The description and viewing conditions are about as good as one could reasonably hope for. Is this an invasion year for mureelets? Is James L. Hansen given to practical jokes? There is no obvious reason not to vote for this bird, but hard to vote for. I'd like to talk this record over at the spring meeting. (Even more, I'd like to see one.)

**Eastern Meadowlark:** See CBC discussion. There was only one report apart from CBCs, but no details were provided, leaving the record conjectural. Acceptance of this species as a winter visitor in Iowa requires, in my opinion, rigorous proof. Assumptions are dangerous. Until proven otherwise, I believe that we should assume that Easterns leave Iowa during January and early February. Records based on song and call notes or specimens from road-kills are eagerly sought as evidence for occurrence of Easterns in winter. Barb Wilson has demonstrated clearly that identification by plumage characters in winter is inconclusive at best.

**Western Meadowlark:** The earliest singing spring birds were heard on 18 Feb near Cedar Rapids (PW). I suspect that a few days after this time Easterns return to Iowa. Observers should report the first songs or calls for each species in order to document their presence in early spring.

**Yellow-headed Blackbird:** A late male was at Brown's L. on 2 Jan (JP). See also CBC.

**Rusty Blackbird:** A male at Brown's L. on 2 Jan and 20 in Palo Alto Co. on 30 Jan (THK, FLM) are a bit unusual for mid-winter, especially in northern Iowa.

**Brewer's Blackbird:** None were reported this winter, the first time in several years.

**Great-tailed Grackle:** The Ames CBC bird found on 19 Dec is the latest record. Another report was undocumentated.

**Common Grackle:** Unusual reports were of 1 with a white head at Iowa City on 21 Dec (JF), and a normal (?) individual at a Glenwood feeder on 2-6 Jan, when it froze to death (DoR).

**Brown-headed Cowbird:** Mid-January reports are rare, especially of flocks. Thus the 110 in Iowa City on 10 Jan (TJS) was noteworthy.

**Northern Oriole:** 1 successfully wintered, feeding on jelly at an Iowa City feeder ("TJS), and another was documented at Davenport on 13 Dec ("PCP). Both were males of the expected "Baltimore" race. The Iowa City bird was a first-year bird and the Davenport bird was an adult. In recent years the provision of fruit at feeders has allowed occasional birds to linger into winter and occasionally survive the period.

**House Finch:** The range and population explosion continues apace. Apart from the 33 reported on CBCs at 7 locations statewide, noteworthy additional reports included the 15 in Cedar Rapids (PW) and an adult female at a Council Bluffs feeder, one of very few western Iowa records ("DaS). Petersen reports that about 12 of his bird-feeding customers in the Quad Cities area have House Finches at their feeders, indicating that this is the population center for Iowa.

**Red Crossbill:** This was an off-year for crossbills, at least in Iowa, but several were reported. All reports were during a very short period at the end of February: 24 at Aspen Grove Cemetery in Burlington on 18-25 Feb (RCE, JF, CF), 5 at Glendale Cemetery in Des Moines on 27 Feb (DT, EIA, EuA), 2 in Hardin Co. on 27 Feb (MPR), and a female on 26 Feb at Clinton (JG).

**White-winged Crossbill:** A female at a Pella feeder seen by many from 28 Jan through 27 Feb was the only report besides the 3 found on CBCs.

**Common Redpoll:** Numbers were low, only 7 birds at 2 CBC locations and 30 others were reported. The first were 6 at Big Creek S.P. on 13 Jan (SD).

**American Goldfinch:** Unusual was the albino photographed near Glenwood (DoR).

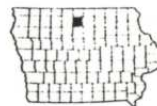
**Evening Grosbeak:** Very few occurred in Iowa this winter, with none on CBCs and only two other reports of 21 birds: 20 in Boone Co. on 10 Feb (Betty Bennett fide SL) and 1 at a Pleasantville feeder 25 Jan (EIA, EuA).

## CONTRIBUTORS

Eloise Armstrong (Booneville); Eugene Armstrong (Booneville); Bart Ballard (Ames); Robert Bradley (Cedar Rapids); Gordon J. Brand (Newton); Judith Carlson (Laurens); Robert Cecil (Keokuk); David J. Conrads (Cedar Falls); Dorothy M. Cornett (Centerville); Raymond L. Cummins (Centerville); Rita DeWall (Pocahontas); James J. Dinsmore (Ames); Steve Dinsmore (Ames); Bery Engebretsen (Johnston); Andrew S. Fix (Ames); Charles Fuller (Burlington); James Fuller (Iowa City); Jacqueline Gardner (Clinton); Ronald V. Harms (Laurens); Douglas C. Harr (Larchwood); Mary Jo Hartogh (Elma); Art R. Huser (Sioux City); Bill Huser (South Sioux City, NE); Thomas H. Kent (Iowa City); Calvin A. Knight (Iowa City); Sharon Laub (Rippey); Paul Martsching (Ames); Francis L. Moore (Waterloo); Babs Padelford (Bellevue, NE); Loren Padelford (Bellevue NE); Peter C. Petersen (Davenport); Jerry Probst (Sioux City); Beth Proescholdt (Liscomb); Mark Proescholdt (Liscomb); Douglas Rose (Glenwood); Roger Rose (Glenwood); W. Ross Silcock (Tabor); Jim Sinclair (Indianola); David Starr (Council Bluffs); Thomas J. Staudt (Iowa City); Dennis Thompson (Des Moines); Douglas A. Wheelock (Sioux City); Pete Wickham (Cedar Rapids); and Barbara L. Wilson (Hastings).

## ANCIENT MURRELET AT CRYSTAL LAKE

JAMES L. HANSEN



I first saw the bird at about 10:30 a.m. on 28 October 1987 at Crystal Lake, Hancock County, as I motored in a small boat from one part of the lake to another. I caught only a glimpse of it and noted only a black and white head as it dived within 30 feet of the front of the boat. I backed off and circled slowly for a couple of minutes, but was unable to sight it again. About 1:00 p.m., I saw the bird again as I slowly motored toward a mixed flock of Surf and White-winged scoters. It dived one time when I apparently approached too close. It called one time, a fairly loud "krrreep". I watched the bird for 30 minutes and saw it from front, back, and both sides. It never flew and was still there when I left.

The bird was about the size of a Pied-billed Grebe, but chunkier, with a shorter neck. The head, back of the neck, and throat were black. The white of the breast extended up the sides of the head. The pale-pink, chicken-like bill was especially apparent when the bird looked directly at me. The back was gray, with a few darker, curved lines on each side of the back. The black on the throat extended down farther than shown in *A Guide to Identification Birds of North America* (Robbins et al), but was similar to that shown in *Field Guide to Birds of North America* (National Geographic Society).

No one else saw the bird, although Curt Nelson and I looked for it the next day. Pete Petersen and Steve Dinsmore also made an extensive search for the bird.

103 S. 17th St., Clear Lake, IA 50428

**Editor's Note:** This record, which was accepted by the Records Committee, is a first for Iowa. Ancient Murrelet breeds along the northern edge of the Pacific Ocean and winters south along the coast to California and Japan. Unlike other alcids, Ancient Murrelet is an expected inland vagrant with records from Alberta (3), Montana (5), Idaho, Utah, Nevada (3), Manitoba, Wyoming, Colorado (2), New Mexico, Nebraska, Minnesota (6), Wisconsin (5), Illinois (2), Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Louisiana. Of 23 dates that I found, 11 were from November, 4 from October, 3 from March, 2 from December, and 1 each from February, May, and July. Many of the records are of birds found dead or exhausted, sometimes in strange locations such as along highways or in residential areas. THK.

What species? ancient murrelet How many? one

Location? Crystal Lake (1/2 mi. N of town of Crystal Lake, Hancock Co.)

Type of habitat? open, shallow lake

When? date(s): October 28, 1987 time: 1:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Who? your name and address: James L. Hansen, 103 S. 17th St. Clear Lake, Iowa 50428

others with you: none - I was alone.

others before or after you: none The following day Curt Nelson from Mason City and I looked for the bird by boat but did not see it.

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.

I first saw the bird about 10:30 a.m., as I motored in a small boat from one part of the lake to another. I caught only a glimpse of it and noted only a black and white head as it dived within about 30 feet of the front of the boat. I backed off and circled slowly for a couple of minutes but was unable to resight it.

About 1:00 p.m. I saw the bird again as I slowly motored toward a mixed flock of surf and white-winged scoters. It dived one time when I apparently approached too closely. It called one time, a fairly loud "krreeep", or something similar. (I was surprised by the sudden call so may not be describing it very well.) I watched the bird for 30 minutes and saw it from front, back, and both sides. It never flew and was still there when I left.

It was about the size of a pied-billed grebe, but "chunkier", with a shorter neck. It had a black head, back of the neck, and throat, with the white on the breast extending up the sides of the head. The pale-pink, chicken-like bill was especially apparent when the bird looked directly at me. The back was gray, with a few darker, curved lines on each side of the back. The black on the throat extended down further than shown in Robbins et al.; it was more like what is shown in the National Geographic guide.

Similar species and how eliminated: Geographic guide.  
Other murrelets and similar water birds were ruled out by the head pattern and the pink bill.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? No one else saw it, but I had no reservations!

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:  
good lighting (high clouds, occasional sun at my back), observed at about 50 yards with 7 x 35 binoculars

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I never saw one before, but I am quite familiar with ducks, grebes, and other water birds.

References and persons consulted before writing description: Birds of N. America (Robbins), National Geographic guide, Dr. Jim Dinsmore

How long before field notes made? 6 hours this form completed? 2 days