

Prairie Warbler
14 Sep 1988
Norwalk, Warren Co., IA
*Johnson
IBL 59:16, 77

Record Number: 88-33
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Ann Johnson, 14 Sep, addendum 4 May 1989

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 59:16
Records Committee: IBL 59:77

VOTE: 3-A-D, 4-NA

NA. Very suggestive, but not conclusive.

NA. Magnolia Warbler not eliminated.

NA. Identification as Prairie Warbler apparently based on color and pattern of underparts, "darker areas of face", and indistinct wing bars. Other warblers, like fall Blackpoll, fall Blackburnian, and Cape May may also show these features. More detail on extent of streaking on underparts, facial pattern, color of back, and wing pattern are needed to make this record acceptable.

A-D. Good description. No other species fits.

NA. Description not adequate enough to rule out Magnolia Warbler. Facial pattern of female or immature Prairie Warbler not described. Could not conclude that what was seen was a Prairie or some other species.

A-D. Seems adequate--based on yellow coloration and "distinct black streaking on the sides."

REVOTE (after further information provided): 3 A-D, 4 N-A

NA. Several factors make this a difficult record: Iowa is at the very edge of this species range making fall records very unlikely from migrants coming from further north. If this was a local resident, one would expect it to have already departed like the other "fringe" birds such as Hooded or Yellow-throated Warbler. So this becomes a problem of conclusively separating a rather unexpected species from a number of very expected migrants. This observer obviously has a good deal of experience with warblers. However, I can't judge this experience, I can only evaluate the written descriptions. I'm 95% convinced this was a Prairie Warbler, but this is not enough the age [sic] to vote that this is a conclusive description.

NA. I am not convinced the facial pattern matches prairie.

NA. I am still not convinced that Cape May, Bay-breasted, and/or Pine warblers have been adequately eliminated. Elimination of these species apparently rests on the color of the undertail coverts, facial markings, and extent of streaking on the underparts. In the NGS guide, Prairie Warbler has white undertail coverts, not yellow. The olive streaks on the sides of this bird could also fit a male Pine Warbler. Better elimination of these species is needed before I accept this record.

NA. A 10-second look at a very rare fall warbler that could be confused with the very common Magnolia is best left undecided. The findings are suggestive, however, since no white was seen in

the tail. I'm not sure one could decide from the character of the streaking.

A-D. Thanks for your reinforcement and additional information on this record: it helped a lot. This additional input clarifies and answers any questions raised in the comments on the negative votes for this sighting.

A-D. See comments in 88-32, above.

SENT TO: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, IA 50211 [3/29/89, 5/30/89]

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Prairie Warbler

Location: My Yard - small acreage in northern Warren County, IA

Habitat: Mixed open woods and field edge with creek and many shrubs

Date(s): 9/14/88

Time: 6:45 pm to 6:45 pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: none

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 behavior and voice.

While playing catch with my son in the front yard, I noticed a small, warbler-sized bird at the top of a dead elm approximately twenty feet away. Immediately notable was the "bright yellow underneath with distinct black streaking on the sides." I grabbed the binoculars from close by and had approximately ten seconds to observe the following: "bright yellow from undertail coverts to head with duller yellow extending onto face; darker areas on face; no eyering; striking black streaking on sides only; breast clear yellow; olive back; wing bars distinct but not a stark contrast; warbler bill." The tail was not well observed before the bird flew to the south. I searched the neighbor's yard with no success. Tail bobbing was not observed in the short time I had to watch. The bird looked very much like the female prairie warbler pictured in the Audubon Master Guide.

Similar species and how eliminated:

Palm Warbler - no streaking on breast; chestnut cap not evident; streaking was black; breeding plumage unlikely on this date

Pine Warbler - belly and undertail coverts bright yellow; wingbars not as distinct as the wing was not as dark nor the bars as white; streaking on the sides darker than a pine

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NA

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

Bird was high in 40' elm so at 20' (paced) light against the sky wasn't particularly good with naked eye. Even looking SE against a SW sun, the resolution of my 7x26 Bushnell binoculars alleviated the lighting problem.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Prairies have been seen in the southeastern part of the country. 30+ years experience in identifying warblers.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

None prior to field notes; National Geographic Field Guide, Audubon Master Guide, and other guides consulted prior to identification and completion of this form. I also called Jim Sinclair with field marks who surmised prairie.

How long before field notes made? immediately How long before this form completed? 3 weeks

The following additions to the original description submitted may clarify my sighting of the prairie warbler. I suppose the failure to adequately describe and eliminate similar species can be contributed to a lack of experience in verbalizing what I saw. What was obvious to my eyes was obviously not adequately conveyed in the original documentation. Similar species cited by the committee were not even consciously considered in identification because of the combination of field marks that I saw.

Additional description:

The underparts of this bird were a vivid yellow, making the contrast with the streaking similar in color to a breeding male goldfinch. The two wing bars also had a yellowish tinge to them. The yellow on the head was much more muted than the body, although I didn't notice any particularly distinctive cheek patches. The duller yellow area extended up around the eye and blended into the plain olive-colored top of the head and back. Although the streaking on the sides was bold enough to indicate a female, the facial markings were more olive than black, indicative of the immature as illustrated in Peterson. The cheek stripe on the female was not as evident as illustrated in the guides but may have been due to feather arrangement at the time. The bird looked very much like the female prairie warbler pictured in the Audubon Master Guide.

Other similar species eliminated:

Magnolia Warbler - Magnolia's body and wings too dark; adult eliminated because of no streaking on breast (only sides) and no black facial mask; immature does not have heavy enough streaking nor yellow extending up the face and around the eye far enough and the wingbars are too contrasting (black and white)

Cape May Warbler - vibrant yellow undertail coverts would seem to by and large eliminate the Cape May, especially when combined with no streaking on the breast and belly; wing bars were two distinct pale yellowish markings, not white or blotched together

Blackburnian Warbler - unstreaked back; no distinct cheek patch; no white wing bars on dark wings

Blackpoll/Bay-breasted Warbler - unstreaked back; primary identification of fall blackpoll is white undertail coverts which eliminates this bird immediately. Also this complex normally has more distinct white wing bars on darker wings and the streaking on the sides is not the stark black on brilliant yellow but a more muted yellowish wash.

Ann Johnson
5/4/89