

Black-headed Grosbeak
10 May 1982
Amana woods, Iowa Co., IA
*Silcock, *Kent
IBL 52:62; 53:36

Record Number: 82-09
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATIONS

W. Ross Silcock
Thomas H. Kent

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn to Tom Kent, 21 December 1982

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 52:61
Records Committee: IBL 53:36

VOTE: 4-III, 1-IV, 2-abstain [submitted and voted as hybrid]

Have not had a chance to read reference article -- perhaps it would be better to leave it as only a hybrid and not assign species.

REVOTE (at meeting, 20 November 1982): no change.

105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.
Westerville, OH 43081
Dec. 21, 1982

Dear Tom:

While not impossible, female Pheucticus grosbeaks are certainly some of the more difficult passerines to identify. My biggest problem with most documentations I receive is that observers only describe the underparts and ignore the rest of the bird. It is very difficult to analyze these sightings based on incomplete descriptions. For all unusual female Pheucticus grosbeak reports, the entire bird should be described. I cannot emphasize this fact enough.

Separating the two species (and hybrids) utilizes basically the same field marks at all times of the year. However, observers should note that birds in worn plumage (either late summer or late winter) can become faded and may lose some of these characteristics. When identifying female grosbeaks, the following characteristics should be noted (listed in their order of importance):

1. Underpart pattern: Breast color (distinctly orange-buff in Black-heads, a dirty buffy-white in Rose-breasts while the hybrids would have traces of both colors)
Streaking (Rose-breasts are uniformly and heavily streaked with dark brown, Black-heads are normally unstreaked except for some fine streaking along the sides of the breast while hybrids have intermediate streaking patterns (finer streaks than Rose-breasts but more extensive streaking than Black-heads))
Contrast with belly (on Black-heads, the belly is distinctly lighter and yellower than the breast while Rose-breasts lack any contrast between breast and belly)
2. Head pattern: The browns tend to be darker (a dark chocolate brown) on Black-heads than on Rose-breasts (more medium brown). Rose-breasts have white or buffy-white eye lines while they tend to be yellow on Black-heads. This field mark is variable. While white or yellow eye lines may be useful characteristics, buffy eye lines are problematical.
3. Rump color (best visible in flight): Black-heads have a greenish rump that appears noticeably lighter than the remainder of the upperparts; Rose-breasts have rumps quite similar to their upperparts.
4. Wing linings: Black-heads have pale yellow (lemon yellow) wing linings while Rose-breasts have darker yellow or yellow-orange wing linings. These linings are hard to see well and require comparative experience with both species to really be useful.

One additional comment; on winter birds, the immature males of both species should start their pre-nuptial molt by late winter. Some individuals may start this molt a bit earlier (the timing of this molt has not been extensively studied). Observers should be careful to look for nuptial plumage characteristics on any winter bird.

An excellent description of Rose-breasted Grosbeak plumages and its molt sequence is found in Roberts "A manual for the identification of the birds of Minnesota and neighboring states". Unfortunately, I am not aware of a similar description of Black-headed Grosbeaks nor do I know of any articles that satisfactorily deal with this identification problem. The 1974 article in the Wilson Bulletin (Vol. 86, No. 1) contains some useful information but is difficult to use unless you are able to examine a number of specimens.

My thoughts on the 4 female Black-headed Grosbeak reports in Iowa during 1982 were as follows:

- #1. 10 May 1982 at Amana Woods: based on underpart streaking, I would lean towards a hybrid although it is difficult to say in the absence of other field marks.
- #2. 14 July 1982 in Dickinson Co.: I can't identify this bird with certainty and treated it as Pheucticus sp. His description of the underparts is ambiguous (there weren't any heavy streaks but he didn't say it was unstreaked). The white facial stripes are closer to a Rose-breast rather than a Black-head.
- #3. 29 July 1982 near Decorah (I presume you received this report; Jeri McMahon said she was going to send it to you): Probably a Black-head based on underpart color and the lack of streaking although other characteristics would have been useful.
- #4. 23 Nov. 1982 near Elkhart: Probably a Black-head based on the observed characteristics (especially the orangish-buff streaks on the back. This field mark indicates the bird was most likely a first-year males. Rose-breasts never have these streaks in any plumage).

One warning about grosbeak identification (for both sexes). Occasionally, one observes aberrant birds that are not characteristic of either species. These birds should not be identified in the field. (We had such a bird in Ohio last year. All I can say about it is that I think it may have been a male grosbeak; I have no idea which species.) Hence, I am suspicious of birds that are not completely typical of one species of the other.

I hope this information is useful to you.

Sincerely,


Bruce Peterjohn

Observation of Hybrid Rosebreasted x Blackheaded Grosbeak
(one female)

Date: 10 May 1982

ca 6.30 pm for ca 1-2 minutes.

Place: Amana Woods

Habitat: Deciduous woods. Trail through woods along ridge.

Identification: At first look the bird appeared to be a female Rosebreasted Grosbeak, indeed it briefly encountered a male of that species while under observation. However the breast was a deep chestnut buffy color, which suggested further study of the bird. I checked its underwings which were pale, with no discernable difference in color between the underwing coverts and the undersides of the primaries — all of which appeared pale yellowish to creamy white. No color was seen in the otherwise buffy-white eye-stripe, and the breast streaking seemed somewhat reduced, especially towards the belly. There were streaks on the flanks also. None of the streaks seemed as large or blotchy as those of a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

These features suggested that the bird was a hybrid Rosebreasted-Blackheaded, probably nearer to Blackheaded, approximately 60:40.

Later consultation of a paper on these birds tended to confirm this conclusion.

Other observers T. Kent, C. Bendorf, ~~III~~

Optical 10x50 binoculars at 30'. Light good. Sun no problem.

W. Ross Sillcock

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RR2 MALVERN IOWA 51551

What species? Hybrid Black-headed/Rose-breasted Grosbeak How many? 1 ♀Location? Amara Woods, Iowa Co., IowaType of habitat? Deep oak woodsWhen? date(s): 10 May 1982 time: 7:30 to 7:32 (approx)Who? your name and address: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St, Iowa Cityothers with you: Carl Bendort, Ross Silcock, Tom Standtothers before or after you: 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 voice and behavior.

"We saw a female grosbeak in the Amara Woods. It was with a male Rose-breasted. It had a yellow-orange-giffy throat and upper breast which was fairly well demarcated. The streaks in the breast and sides seemed finer than usual for Rose-breasted. The top and back and wings were brown with the usual streaks of a Rose-breasted."

Based on Anderson + Daugherty (Wilson Bull 86:1-11, 1974) this bird would be rated 5/8 Black-headed which is considered a hybrid.

Similar species and how eliminated:

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
clear late PM sun on tops of trees, 40 ft, 8x binoculars.
Bird near top of trees.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: No experience with hybrids.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Robbins, Peterson

How long before field notes made? 2 hrs this form completed? 5 days

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