

Middlewestern Prairie Region
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Yellow-throated warbler (*Dendroica ^{dominica} graciae*) 2. Number: 1
3. Location Brookside Park, Ames, Story County, Iowa
4. Date: 9 May 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 07:45 to 07:48
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):
- bright yellow throat, black cheeks with white spot behind each cheek, white stripe above eye, black top of head, white underside, black streaking on sides, black and white wings, plain gray back changing to black at neck
- It was foraging so we got good looks at all parts of the body.
7. Description of voice, if heard: none heard
8. Description of behavior: flitting in shrub
9. Habitat - general: park near Iowa State University
specific: deciduous woods with many trails - near Squaw Creek
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
Blackburnian warbler - throat ^{was} bright yellow, not orange, white markings on face, not yellow or orange. Saw top of head really well + was all black
11. Distance (how measured)? about 10 m away (estimated)
about 5 m high in tree 12. Optical equipment: 7x35 binocs
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
sky cloudy, quite overcast, couldn't see sun at all, saw bird really well against large dark tree trunk
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
I never saw this species before, but I know warblers pretty well (being from Maine)
15. Other observers: Aimee Boden, Larence Lewis (ornithology class)
16. Did the others agree with your identification? Yes
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird:
Gary Frederick (a few days before in same park)
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
Robbin's Birds of North America
didn't influence description, just confirmed it
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 2 hours
- Ellen J. Johnson Address: Dept. of Animal Ecology, ISU
Signature
- Date: 9 May 1978 City, State: Ames, Iowa 50011

If you watch birds solely for your own enjoyment, there really is no need to describe your observations in writing. But, if you have seen something unusual and want to share this experience with others, a written description is essential. It is true your immediate friends who know and respect your ability probably will accept your report without question, but what about those who do not know you, particularly the bird students 100 years from now who cannot know you? Also, what about the habitual skeptics? And most importantly, what about the compilers of regional bird lists who probably will insist that records be scientifically sound? All these critics will investigate your observation not because they assume you are wrong, but merely because they ordinarily expect verification. Whether the individual demanding verification realizes it or not, in doing so, he is employing a basic rule of the scientific method.

If your observation involves a common species during a season of abundance, verification is achieved simply by returning there again in season. If, however, the observation involves a rare species, or a common species out of season, verification is not obtained easily and special documentation is necessary. The best documentation is a collected specimen, and many bird students insist this is the only acceptable evidence. However, others recognize the importance and reliability of sight records accumulated by the experienced field observer, and maintain that even extraordinary sight records are acceptable if accompanied by an adequate verifying description.

It must be emphasized that a request for documentation is not an affront, but an effort to perpetuate a record by obtaining concrete evidence which may be permanently preserved for all to examine. This procedure is required for every extraordinary observation irrespective of the observer.

It should also be pointed out that with the great photographic equipment now available, species identification from photographs are possible. Such species documentation are highly desirable and should be sent to the state editors or to large museums.