

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

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Townsend's Solitaire (Myadestes townsendi) 2. Number: One
3. Location Near Highlandville (Ten miles N.E. of Decorah) along Upper Iowa River
4. Date: January 15, 1978 5. Time Bird seen: 9.45 A.M. to 11.00 A.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):
Size: slightly smaller than a Robin, SHAPE: A slim, long tailed Blue bird-like.
Color: A uniform grey, slightly lighter on underparts (especially throat and belly) with black wings and tail. Bill: Totally dark, blackish; bill shape slim and rather thrush-like. Legs: Dark. Eye: Dark. Detailed Plumage: Distinct white eyeing. Dark primaries, secondaries, and greater Coverts, with tannish-yellow bar across middle of wing Feathers (seen only in flight).
Tail: Was long and dark with distinct white borders on 2 outside feathers
7. Description of voice, if heard: Individual short, mellow, whistling or piping notes about a second or more apart in series. Call heard about twenty times.
8. Description of behavior: was seen feeding on Juniper berries.
9. Habitat - general: A river bluff with a Southern exposure, covered by Prairie grass; Junipers.
specific: scattered Junipers (.1 to 4 meters tall) on dry, rocky slope.
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
Mockingbird: Had no large patches of white, eye color was dark not yellow.
Shrike species: Had no mask or other dark facial pattern, bill different.
Grey Catbird: Had white in tail and eyeing. Shape differed also.
11. Distance (how measured)? From 100 meters to within 2.5 meters (estimation). 12. Optical equipment: 7x35 Bushnell custom Binoculars
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
Occasion good sunlight at my back or over-shoulder
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: The solitaire was observed by me in Colorado during 1977. As well as prior observations in Iowa.
15. Other observers: Paul and Mark Dietzenbach
16. Did the others agree with your identification? Because of their inexperience with this species they could only conclude it was no other species.
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: Darwin Koenig
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
Description was taken directly from field notes, written at time of observation, no books were consulted.

Joe Schaufmuel
Signature

Address: Box 254

Date: January 15, 1978

City, State: St. Lucas Iowa

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.