

Summer Tanager 1 Record Number: 90-41
2 Dec 1990 Classification: A-P
Pleasant Valley, Scott Co., IA
Brian Blevins
photo (actually a Summer Tanager); IBL 61:53,59, 62:22

DOCUMENTATION

Brian Blevins [submitted as Hepatic Tanager]

PHOTOGRAPHS

Brian Blevins, P-0361

LETTER

Gary H. Rosenberg to Carl J. Bendorf, 21 September 1991

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:53, 59

Records Committee: IBL 62:22, 64:70

REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION

Tom Kent to Records Committee, 13 Sep 1993

VOTE: 2 A-D, 5 NA

A-D: Hepatic Tanagers are not highly mobile as vagrants but surrounding states do have some records. The birder is familiar with this species and the document is believable. Only one field mark should have been address that wasn't. The cheek patch. On the out of focus photo of the birds side profile if you look closely most of the patch is sort of visible. I feel this is an acceptable bird.

NA: The key features I would look for in Hepatic Tanager are not conclusive in the photos and documentation. Hepatic should have an all dark bill but the documentation mentions that the lower mandible was "lighter brown". This doesn't fit. The second distinctive feature of Hepatic is the cheek patch. The documentation doesn't even mention a cheek patch and the photos clearly show a bird with a rather uniform grayish head without any suggestion of a cheek patch. This appears to be a Summer Tanager, an astounding record by itself.

NA: A very intriguing report. Any tanager seen this late in the year is an exceptional record. However, I am not convinced that either the photos or the documentation support an identification of Hepatic Tanager. First, I cannot detect any gray facial mask on the photographs nor does the observer mention this. Bent (1958) states that first winter birds are like the female with "grayish cheeks." it is difficult to tell from the photographs but I cannot detect any color difference between cheek area and crown. Second, the bill appears to be closer to the shape and size of Summer Tanager. Third, regarding bill coloration, THE AUDUBON MASTER GUIDE states, that young Summer Tanager and even adults in fall can have differing degrees of darkness on the bill. I personally have seen Summer Tanagers in the fall with this exact coloration.

A-D: I am inclined to accept this record. First, the bird was adequately identified as a Tanager. Second, although we don't have what I would call an established pattern of vagrancy to the Midwest, we do have a precedent. A Hepatic Tanager was seen in west central Illinois in Nov. 1981 and was thoroughly, unmistakably identified (pers. comm., Vernon Kleen, Illinois Records Committee). Also, the photo seems to show some semblance of breast streaking. The only Tanager that would show this is Hepatic. The photo also shows a more-or-less cheek patch, consistent with Hepatic. Also, the described call note also supports Hepatic. I am voting A-D as the photo, by itself, does not appear to be diagnostic.

NA: This is an interesting record, given the date, for any Piranga species. Bent, (Life Histories of N.A. Blackbirds, Orioles, Tanagers, and Allies, 1958) states that in Hepatic "sexes are alike in juvenile plumage and in the first winter plumage. The first winter plumage is acquired by a partial post-nuptial molt, in July and August. This plumage is apparently worn through the first breeding season with little change, except that some young males may acquire a few red or orange feathers on the head and throat. The fully adult plumage is acquired in late summer at the first post-nuptial molt, which is complete and practically the only seasonal molt of any consequence." This does not

fit the description in the documentation very well. Several other extremely important field marks were not noted or were inconsistent with Hepatic tanager. the dark grayish check patch was not mentioned but is a good field mark on both sexes of this species; it also does not show in the photos. No mention was made of a gray wash on the flanks, again should be seen on either sex of this species. The bill of Hepatic Tanager should be blackish to black not lighter color shown in the photos and described in the documentation. Call notes are probably "chucks" of Summer Tanager; no pattern of "chucks" was mentioned. Being this long after breeding season call notes could be shortened version of Summer Tanager. Coloration (blotches) also makes this record sound more like Summer Tanager than Hepatic Tanager. Photos look that way to me also.

NA: No dark ear patch was observed which almost has to be seen to denote a Hepatic Tanager. The various field guides that were consulted (Nat'l Geographic, Robbins, R.T. Peterson's Western Birds, and Audubon Master Guide) show varying degrees of dark color on all four Tanager species from pale to dark and no great consistency on any of them except Hepatic's bills are all dark. The Summer Tanagers shown in Nat'l Geographic have darker-looking bills than usually shown. Also, there is variation shown on the colors of the females (and young males as similar) especially of Summer and Hepatic Tanagers to make them look quite similar in color. (The photos were interesting but not definitive to species for me). I think a young male Summer Tanager would be a more likely candidate for this bird which would still be extraordinary for Iowa in December.

REVOTE (1993): 7 A-P

A-P, Light bill/orangish-yellow color.

90-41

13 September 1993

To: IOU Records Committee

From: Tom Kent

Re: Request for reconsideration of record

Record: 90-41 Summer Tanager

Reason for request: Apparently not re-reviewed after outside consultation.

Comment: The outside consultant clearly identified this bird as a Summer Tanager from the photos. The secretary reclassified for the annual report.



Summer Tanager P-0361
Pleasant Valley, Scott Co., IA
2 Dec 1990 Brian Blevins

September 21, 1991

Carl J. Bendorf
845 Cypress Ct.
Iowa City, IA 52245

Dear Carl:

I'm sorry for the long delay in getting this information back to you -- such is the life of a bird tour leader. Let me start first with the easy one.

Concerning the identification of the tanager seen on Dec. 2 1990, the photos clearly represent a Summer Tanager and not a Hepatic. I have never seen a Hepatic that shows the overall orangish-yellow color that is clearly depicted in the photos. This is entirely typical of young males or females of Summers. Hepatic males are entirely "brick" red, not orange-yellow. Female Hepatics are very yellow on the throat region fading to dull yellow on the rest of the underparts. Furthermore, there is no indication on the photos, or in the description, that the bird had dusky cheeks. In fact, the photos suggest the opposite -- the thin eyeringed appearance with the uniform cheek is typical of Summer. The bill as depicted in the photos is not typical of a Hepatic either. There is quite a bit of brown on the maxilla but the mandible appears fairly pale. I'm not sure what this suggests, whether it is a young bird (probably), or something else, such as diet etc. (many out of place, or out of season birds tend to show some sort of defect), but the bill looks large and the wrong for Hepatic. Typical Hepatics have very gray bills without areas of pale on the mandible. In the description, the observer describes the bill as gray on the mandible, but the photos suggest otherwise. Regardless, there is nothing about the photos that suggest Hepatic over Summer so I am inclined to go with Summer for the I.D. I went ahead and showed the photos to Will Russell, and David Stejskal, both members of the Arizona Bird Committee, and they both said obviously Summer.

Now for the difficult one. There is no doubt that the identification of the Yellow Grosbeak is correct. I have read through the information that you sent along with the slides and have a few comments.

I can't really comment too much on the identification to subspecies. I suggest if you continue to find this of importance that you send the photos to Van Remsen or Steve Cardiff at L.S.U so that they compare them directly to specimens. Ultimately, I don't think this would have much bearing on my decision as to the likelihood of natural occurrence. If the bird turns out to

be of the northern population one could argue both ways. Perhaps it is more likely an escaped cagebird as it is more likely that a bird from the northern population would be captured and transported to the U.S. If the bird turns out to be one from South America I'm not sure what that would prove. Most subspecies are at least somewhat migratory. Without direct comparison to specimens, not much can be said. Photos are often a bit misleading as to exact tone of color, so the entire exercise may turn out to be futile.

The main question is whether the bird is an escape or not. In my opinion this is basically an unanswerable question. There will never be a 100 % definite answer. So how do we handle records such as these. In Arizona we have to handle many records of dubious origin, and there are several different approaches. My approach is that not all records have to be put in one of two categories; wild and naturally occurring, or escaped. In my opinion there is a third category, a so-called gray list, that birds should be placed on when there simply is not enough data to go on. I feel that to be included in the scientific record, we must be as certain as possible that the record represents a naturally occurring individual. To do this we use precedence and whether or not the record fits into a known pattern. Does the bird in question migrate? Is it a likely vagrant at that particular season? Are there previous records of the species away from areas of known occurrence during that season? etc. etc... Most vagrants can be evaluated using this approach. For example, the Summer Tanager record discussed above. There are many southern U.S. winter records of Summer Tanagers, and this simply fits into a known pattern of occurrence. But how do you evaluate a first North American record such as the Swallow-tailed Gull record from coastal California. In my opinion, this record can not be accepted onto our normal lists as there is absolutely no precedence for that species to occur in the northern Hemisphere north of the Galapagos Islands. This record should be placed onto an hypothetical list until more records occur that establish some sort of pattern, then that record can be re-evaluated. Of course there are many records that are more difficult to evaluate. How many records are needed to establish a pattern? I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions, but I would prefer to see the scientific record as clean as possible, therefore I tend to be very conservative in my evaluation of records. Some say that if there is a greater than 50/50 chance of it being wild, then it should be accepted. My acceptance level is closer to 95 %.

Anyway, How does the Yellow Grosbeak record fit into all of this. One, there are no records for this species for winter in North America; almost all the records are from late spring/early summer. Furthermore, there is no established pattern of this species moving northward in winter in other

areas within its range, such as in Mexico, the area most likely the source of any vagrant found in the U.S. This species is a common cage bird in Mexico, and although no visible damage to the bird is evident in the photos or descriptions, the possibility of being held for some time in a cage can not be ruled out. The fact that it took up residence for such a long time at a particular feeder is not consistent with the records from Arizona, most of which were out in the wild. The ones that did turn up at feeders have been accepted, but may indeed have been escapees. Who knows. Therefore, in my opinion, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the Yellow Grosbeak in Iowa was a naturally occurring vagrant, and at the very least should be put on an hypothetical list for the state until either further records occur, or some sort of pattern is established elsewhere within its range. If no such list occurs (as in California and Arizona), then in my opinion the record should be rejected as to be conservative in what we accept onto the scientific record. Whether or not the record is accepted onto the Iowa state list does not change the fact that a Yellow Grosbeak was there and that people enjoyed it. That people with large egos will undoubtedly be upset if the record is not accepted, and they will be unable to count the bird on their Iowa (or North America) list is unfortunate, but it comes with being on a state committee. I myself am more concerned with the accuracy of the scientific record than I am with either my list or anyone elses.

I hope you find this a bit useful in your evaluation of the record. Not everyone shares this approach, but... I took it from your letter that I could keep the photos for my files. If you would like them back, just let me know.

Sincerely,

Gary H. Rosenberg

Gary H. Rosenberg

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

90-40
41

What species? Hepatic Tanager How many? 1

Location? 24456 Valley Dr. Pleasant Valley; Scott Co., Iowa

Type of Habitat? Feeder situation where it was eating berries, suet and had water in heated bath.

When? date(s): Dec. 2, 1990 time: 1:15 to 2:20

Who? your name and address: Brian Blevins 2003 East 12th Street Davenport, Iowa 52803

Others with you: Lewis Blevins

Others before or after you: None that I know of.

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, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

This was a tanager with a very large bill that was two toned gray-brown with the bottom mandible being lighter brown and the top mandible dark Payne's Gray almost black. The overall color of the bird was orange-green instead of yellow-green, and it showed blotches and streaks of red color. It is definite that the bird was a male in beginning of transition.

Behavior: This was a very feisty bird, chasing downy woodpeckers from the suet and other small birds from the bath.

Voice: The vocal sounds that were heard were: a raspy shriek when the bird was chasing the downy woodpeckers, and low clucks when the bird was just working the berries and again resting on the bath.

Similar species; how eliminated: Summer, Scarlet, Western Tanager. Scarlet Tanager was eliminated by the lack of dark wing and the orange-green instead of yellow-green. Western Tanager was eliminated by the lack of wing bars. Summer Tanager; this was the closest of the three especially considering the cooperi form found in the southwest. The large bill is common to both species if we consider the cooperi form of the summer; however, the color of the mandible overall more dark than light lends the pull towards hepatic. The dark, brown orange-green also pulled me over to the hepatics in respect to the ones I have observed in Arizona. Call note is different.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? NO
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.
Overcast diffuse lighting, 1 1/2 ft. (eye) 7x35 Binoculars when needed. Mostly by eye.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have seen several Hepatics in Arizona from April through July. Westerns and Summers are also present in Arizona, Colo., Utah, N. Mexico, during annual trips. Summers and Scarlets are both residents in Iowa, Ill. during breeding season.
References and persons consulted before writing description: Masters Guide (Audubon), National Geographic Guide, Peterson's Western Field Guide.

How long before field notes made? As bird was at the Feeder. this form completed? That night

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).