

Black-headed Grosbeak
14 Jul 1982
Little Swan Lake, Dickinson Co., IA
*D. Harr
IBL 52:94; 53:36

Record Number: 82-25
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Douglas C. Harr

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn to Tom Kent, 21 December 1982

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 52:94

Records Committee: IBL 53:36

VOTE: 3-III, 4-IV

III, Might be hybrid, can't tell.

IV, Imm. male has similar breast pattern -- white rather than buffy eye line suggests rose-breasted.

IV, Underwing not described. Hybrid possible.

IV, Could be female black-headed but description doesn't rule out a hybrid. I cannot explain my inconstant ruling between this and the following black-headed record.

III, Lack of streaking (poss. due to light conditions--may have been fine streaks present) suggests little hybrid character.

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.

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Tom Kent
Dec. 21, 1982
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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

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: Black-headed grosbeak

DATE SEEN: 14 July 1982

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Little Swan Lake, Dickinson Co., IA

OBSERVERS: D. Harr

DATE OF REVIEW: 4 October 1982

METHOD OF REVIEW: mail vote

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: IV

COMMENTS: The committee felt that while the bird may not have been a Rose-breasted grosbeak, the evidence was insufficient to rule out the possibility of a hybrid Rose-breasted x Black-headed grosbeak. These birds occur commonly just to the west of Iowa, and should be expected to stray to Iowa occasionally. Descriptions of the plumages of these hybrids can be found in the Wilson Bulletin. vo. 86, pp 1-11, and the Auk, vol. 79, pp 399-424.

The opinions expressed here are based on the information available to the Committee and should not necessarily preclude an alternate interpretation by those who observed the bird firsthand.

Any action may be re-reviewed upon submission of additional evidence.

Explanation of Classification:

- I = labeled, diagnostic specimen, photograph, or recording available for review by the Committee
- II = acceptable sight record documented independently by 3 or more observers
- III = acceptable sight record documented by 1 or 2 observers
- IV = probably correct record, but not beyond doubt
- V = record with insufficient evidence to judge
- VI = probably incorrect identification, escapee, or otherwise unacceptable record

Classification is based on the highest category agreed upon by six of seven committee members.

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Black-headed Grosbeak, female 2. Number: 1
3. Location Woods, N. edge Little Swan Lake, Dickinson Co., Iowa (near Superior)
4. Date: July 14, 1982 5. Time Bird seen: 1:22 PM to 1:23 PM (CDT)

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): Bird was in heavy shade, but some colors & pattern readily seen. Breast was a definite yellow-tan without any heavy spots or streaks. Bill typically grosbeak in size & shape, but color hard to determine in shade. White wing markings prominent. Eyebrow line very stark white in contrast to dark brown above and below. Fainter, but still definite, white strip below auricular patch. Legs & feet appeared dark.

7. Description of voice, if heard: N/A

8. Description of behavior: Sitting on wild plum branch in squatted, grosbeak fashion cocking head & looking upward. Flew away after about 75-80 seconds.

9. Habitat - general: woodlands near lakeshore.
specific: bare branch understory of plum thicket (deep shade), at edge of planting of 25 ft. Austrian pines and black walnut trees.

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain:
Rose-breasted grosbeak (female)--little or no yellow-tan color to breast & more heavily spotted or streaked.
Blue Grosbeak (female)--a more uniform, unstraked brown or tan.

11. Distance (how measured)? approx. 35' (stepped off) 12. Optical equipment: 7x50 bushnell binoculars

13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): Strong sunlight but bird in deep shade.

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
Have not seen species previously; very familiar w/female Rose-breasted Grosbeak

15. Other observers: None

16. Did the others agree with your identification? N/A

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: N/A

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description: Peterson Field Guide to Birds of E. N. Am.; Birds of N. Am. (Robbins, et al.), Aud. Encyclopedia of N. Am. Birds. Peterson text may have influenced my decision on how to describe spotting (faint) on breast. Breast Color description was noted first & was not influenced by texts. It was the first time I'd ever seen a grosbeak with a yellow-tan breast (prominent)

19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? All notes taken on description were recorded 5-10 minutes after sighting.

Signature: Douglas C. Harr Address: Box 65

Date: July 15, 1982 City, State: Larchwood, Ia. 51241