

Black-headed Grosbeak

7 Sep 1999

Woodpecker Marsh, Appanoose? Co., IA

\*Charlotte Scott

IBL 70:145

Record Number: 99-22

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Charlotte Scott to Tom [Kent], 8 and 16 Sep 1999 [4/14/00]

Thomas H. Kent to Charlotte Scott, 12 Sep 1999

REFERENCES

Field Reports: none

Records Committee: IBL 70:145

VOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

NA, The bird is suggestive of an immature male Black-headed Grosbeak, but I don't think it was seen well enough to make a definite identification. The yellow wing linings do not rule out female Rose-breasted. The description of the breast color strongly suggests Black-headed, but colors can be influenced by lighting and optics, and some Rose-breasted females "frequently have a band of buff across the breast, especially in fresh fall plumage." ("Identification of Female Rose-breasted and Black-headed Grosbeaks", Joseph Morlan, Birding Volume 23 Number 4.) The most reliable plumage difference between the two species, which was not well-described, is the width of the streaks in the center of the breast, which are fine on Black-headed and thicker on Rose-breasted.

A-D, First, thanks to the Secretary for requesting additional information on this report, and to the observer for providing it as well as the original documentation. I am voting in favor of the identification based primarily on the description of the underwings. While most other field marks can be argued either way, I feel that the underwings, when seen well, are a pretty concrete field mark. Interesting was the comment by the Secretary that perhaps too much is made of the hybrid issue.

A-D, Even though prompted, the field marks including wing lining color, eye striping, breast color and amount of streaking would be right for Black-headed. Back and rump markings would have been helpful, but were not reported.

NA, The separation of female and immature grosbeaks is very difficult and should always be attempted with critical evaluation and field notes at the time of sighting. It is much less effective in hindsight, especially after personal observations are colored by other sources. Some of the observer's statements point towards Black-headed, while others don't, but the statement "I just assumed we'd seen a Black-headed" shows that other possibilities weren't given enough consideration.

A-D, The most positive feature is the observer's experience combined with the deep orange breast, lack of streaks, yellow wing lining, and dirty head stripes. On the other hand, one should be aware of Kevin Zimmer's warning (The Western Bird

Watcher, 1985), "Although female and immature Black-headed are not as likely to be mistaken for similarly plumaged Rose-breasteds, the reverse mistake can easily be made."

A-D, Yellow wing linings and description of unstreaked breast are conclusive of Black-headed.

A-D, Not a standard document. I enjoyed the observer's persistence.

RE-VOTE (by mail): 4 NA, 3 A-D

NA, I am deferring to the comments of the NA voter citing the Aug. 91 Birding. I had tried to find this article before and couldn't do so, so I appreciate it being cited. Unfortunately, it pretty conclusively makes the case that in the plumage described, the two species cannot be safely identified. Evidently, the yellow wing linings is not as solid as we thought.

NA, The description is suggestive of immature male Black-headed Grosbeak, but doesn't conclusively eliminate female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and many of the details were recalled in hindsight after viewing a field guide. Both immature male Black-headed Grosbeaks and female Rose-breasted Grosbeaks have yellow wing linings. The breast color, described as "yellow, really orange" and later "deep orange" suggests Black-headed, but female Rose-breasted can have a buffy breast, especially in fall when this bird was seen. The observers agree that there was little streaking (which implies that there was some streaking) on the breast, but the location, extent, and most importantly the width of the streaks were not noted. The streaks in the center of the breast are fine on Black-headed and thicker on Rose-breasted.

NA, Lighting would greatly impact the perceived coloring of this bird. If the bird was in shade, or viewed into the sun, a buff breast and white head stripes would be considerably darkened. A first-fall female Rose-breasted Grosbeak has: "under wing coverts lemon-yellow to pale salmon; and underparts relatively buffy with indistinct, dusky streaks." (Pyle 1997). The only mention of distance in the description is "nearby". I'm also troubled giving too much weight to under wing color as evidence, as I've always found this area exceedingly difficult to see well in flight.

NA, too ify.

A-D, I believe field marks as described indicate B H Grosbeak. Main problem is delay in description, but I believe ID is correct.

99-22

Seymour, IA  
Sept. 8, 1999

Dear Tom,

Mary Montgomery, Kay Malmberg and I were birding on a country road near Woodpecker Marsh on Tuesday, Sept. 7. A yellowish-looking, medium-sized bird flew into a small dead tree nearby. We immediately noticed the "gros" bill, the yellow, really orange breast, facial markings, dark-streaked back. We had about 60 seconds viewing before he flew. We all felt it was a grosbeak, and since I do see this species in AZ I was fairly sure it was a Black-headed.

We found a very good picture of him in the new National Geographic Guide--a first-fall male. You mention in BIRDS OF IOWA that they hybridize with Rose-breasted in E. NE and KS. How would you recognize a hybrid?

Yours truly,

Charlotte Felt

99-22

September 12, 1999

Charlotte Scott  
320 E. Lee St.  
Seymour, IA 52590

Dear Charlotte,

As you know, immature and female Black-headed and Rose-breasted grosbeaks are hard to tell apart. I too have seen many in Arizona, including this July.

You obviously saw more than what you list in your description with your own experience added in. Putting names on colors I find very difficult and interpreting colors seen by others even more so.

Before I look at the references, I recall that the most important field marks are color of under wing (red or orange in Rose-breasted, yellow in Black-headed); amount of streaking on sides and breast (minimal in Black-headed); demarcation between belly and breast straight in Rose-breasted, pointed upward in Black-headed; three-toned effect of neck, back, and rump in Black-headed.

After looking at Zimmer (enclosed) I would add color of eye line and rump.

I am also enclosing an article on hybrids, which impresses me by its complexity and lack of information on immatures. Hybrids are identified by grading various field marks, which would take some experience.

I think hybrids are a bit over emphasized—the hybridization zone is narrow, there are many more non-hybrids to wander eastward, and there is much individual variability.

Finally, most Black-headed seen in Iowa in fall were immature males at feeders in late fall. That does mean, however, that you did not see one.

I can't identify your bird from the description. Was the orange on the sides of the breast, or was it more ochre all across the breast? Were there any streaks? Did you see the wing linings?

If you want to have this bird reviewed further, let me know, and I will circulate it to the Records Committee.

Sorry I missed the fall meeting at Ottumwa. Maybe I would have seen you there.

Sincerely,

Thomas H. Kent  
211 Richards Street  
Iowa City, IA 52246

99-22

Sept. 16, 1999

Dear Tom,

Thanks for sending the information. It has been interesting and proves the old adage that one is never too old to learn something new.

I'm afraid I was guilty of assuming immediately that it was an immature Black-headed Grosbeak. I have seen many young Rose-breasted Grosbeak, however not as many in recent years, and this bird seemed quite different.

I have talked to Mary and Kay, and, restating that we saw it only 1-2 minutes, this is our concensus.

We assume that we can say it was a grosbeak! The point here is whether it is a first-year Black-headed <sup>male</sup> or a Rose-breasted. First, we agree that the wing linings were yellow. As it flew off, we all saw the flash of yellow wing linings. About the head striping: We agree that although the lines were very distinct, they were not white. Mary said "Yellowish-white", Kay said "Off-white". I guess I would say "Dirty white".

None of us can say positively about the demarcation between belly and breast. . My most lasting impression was of the color of the breast which was such a deep orange. We also agree that there was very little streaking on the breast <sup>or belly</sup>.

The breast coloration extened <sup>d</sup> across the entire breast.

I'm sorry I haven't been more acientific about this. As I said, I just assumed we'd seen a Black-headed, and it wasn't until later that I decided I should report it. Use your judgment about reporting it.

I know your parents were friends of our Nursing Home Administrator's parents. His name is Alan Griffith. Did you know his wife died suddenly about a week ago? Alan had asked me recently if I saw you at the State Convention.

Thanks.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Scott