

Eastern Meadowlark  
16 Dec 1995  
Red Rock Reservoir, Marion Co., IA  
\*Gordon Brand  
IBL 66:51, 97

Record Number: 95-74  
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Gordon Brand [6/7/96]

REFERENCES

Christmas Bird Count: IBL 66:51

Records Committee: IBL 66:97

VOTE: 1 A-D, 6 NA

NA, The observer understood the rarity of a potential Eastern Meadowlark in winter, but rested his identification on the absence of yellow in the cheeks. Unfortunately, this (and probably all other field marks) is not diagnostic when separating the two species, as pointed out by Barb Wilson in her IBL article based on study of museum skins.

NA, I would not rule out Eastern Meadowlark because I believe it winters in SE Iowa. However, a more detailed description including tail pattern and/or a heard song is necessary to establish this bird as a winter resident in Iowa.

NA, This is a bit difficult as most of the field guides use the criterion of yellow on the cheek to differentiate between the species. Pyle, however, in "Identification Guide to North American Passerines" claims that "this is, perhaps, the most difficult in-hand species identification problem". A combination of the cheek patch description, white in tail, and darkness of the crown stripes might possibly convince me of species, but I am not sure that field identification is possible in Iowa without hearing a call note.

NA, Only one field mark described -- lack of yellow on the cheek. This field mark is only useful in worn plumage. Meadowlarks molt once per year from August to October and are in fresh plumage in December. The yellow on the cheek appears later when they are much easier to identify by song. See, Wilson, B. L. 1983. Identifying meadowlarks in Iowa. Iowa Bird Life 53:83-87. I recently examined a meadowlark specimen from 1 January and thought it was an Eastern because of lack of yellow in the cheek, but later decide that it was a Western based on pattern of white in the tail (see Pyle).

NA, Research done by Barb Wilson a number of years ago came to the conclusion that the two meadowlark species cannot be visually separated in the field in winter, I concur. Hearing the call note of the bird might have helped their case, but none was heard. I think we should discuss this record at the meeting during the weekend of 5/17-19.

NA, One field mark seen well, but even cheek color is a problem if plumage fresh. Buffy feather edging can mask yellow coloration. No mention of tail pattern, or dark/light plumage. Bird also silent.

95-74

Documentation for the sighting of an Eastern Meadowlark on 12/16/95

Activity: Bill Gilbert and I were covering an area a couple miles west of highway 14 and north of Red Rock Lake for our portion of the Red Rock Lake Christmas count. We had turned onto an unimproved road north of Coolidge Ave at 11:30 when we saw the meadowlark with its characteristic bright yellow breast and black necklace. I hurried to get my binoculars to have a good look at the field markings but it flew from the fencepost into an adjacent stock field where it began feeding and pecking around. Determined to get a positive identification as to species, I setup a C 90 spotting scope with a 33x eyepiece.

The lighting conditions were nearly ideal. A very thin cloud cover cast bright but diffuse frontal light on the bird. The yellow underthroat did **not** come up onto the cheek and the cheek was decidedly gray. We could clearly see the yellow lores and so were confident that if yellow did come up onto the cheek, we would have been able to clearly see it. The bird gave us both side and frontal views and so we had ample opportunity to view the bird from all angles. I know that the eastern and western species are a challenge to distinguish but both Bill and I had several minutes to observe the bird from about 30 yards away. The scope has a large light grasp (90mm) and is of excellent quality. The image was very sharp and colorful. Neither of us had any doubt but that this was unmistakably the Eastern Meadowlark species.

The weather was very mild, calm, with temperatures in the upper 30's. The sky had thin high clouds which gave ideal lighting conditions.

Both Bill and I are experienced birders and knew what field characteristics to observe to distinguish this species from the Western Meadowlark. The description given distinguishes this bird from an Western Meadowlark. The bird did not give any vocalizations but the field marks were definitive. Field guides were available with us to illustrate diagnostic features.

I no longer have an official documentation form, but I believe that I have covered everything requested in the documentation form.

  
Gordon James Brand