

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: CAPE MAY WARBLER.

Number: 1.

Location: Feeder in Cedar Rapids, Linn County.

Habitat: Large six-foot-high, covered platform feeder in open backyard. Perhaps two inches of snow cover on ground. Neighborhood of single-family homes with yards, in city but outside of inner city. Large park nearby.

Date and time: 22 December 1999, actual viewing approx. 1:45 to 3:00 p.m..

Name and address: Mike Dooley, 1811 B Ave., Apt. 2, Cedar Rapids IA 52402-5464.

Others with you: Bill Scheible (birder) and our hosts, John and Joyce Havilcek.

Others before or after you: Jim Durbin, Cedar Rapids.

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:

As a starting point, this was clearly a wood warbler, a petite colorful bird with a thin sharp bill. The back was, on casual observation, dark olive--studied observation showed it to be more specifically a gray-olive, and unstreaked. The back transitioned to a bright olive-yellow rump. There was no strong contrast between wing and back; there was no wing bar to speak of except for bare remnants. The crown was the same gray-olive as the back. The eye was surrounded by a yellow eyebrow above and a gray-olive cheek patch below, which showed a small tinge of chesnut below the eye in certain lights. There was a bold post-ocular yellow stripe which continued well around the nape, but the ends of the two stripes did not meet on the nape. This extended post-ocular yellow stripe also had the effect of accentuating the cap-effect to the top of the head. There was a dark line through the eye, contrasting the yellow eyebrow above and the gray-olive cheek patch below. Very close looks revealed a slight downcurve to the bill. The throat had a yellow tinge. The breast was yellow transitioning to a white belly and vent. The breast and sides were strongly streaked. Bill Scheible, who observed the bird with me, remarked on the relatively short tail, but I would not have noted this on my own. From below, the tail showed white with a thin dark edging outlining the outer tail feathers and tip.

Under these conditions, a December day with temperatures barely in the teens and snow on the ground, and being at a feeder station, there was no typical warbler behavior as might apply to a bird in spring in bud-covered trees and with insects available. It was very aggressive toward other birds, chasing off House Finches, Goldfinches, and House Sparrows, but ignoring Mourning Doves. It fed often from a tin of "nectar" (as our host described it) and another tin with jelly and peanut butter. It also occasionally fed on seeds on the platform, on other hanging feeders, and on the ground (or at least briefly visited these areas). From inside, no song was heard, nor was there any indication the bird was singing.

Similar species eliminated: None eliminated on-site. Possible mis-identifications, given the premium conditions and extended period under which this bird was studied, might be as follows (consulting the National Geographic Society field guide): (1) fall adult Blackburnian Warbler: bird in question was strongly streaked on breast and sides, not just flanks; (2) female Townsend's Warbler: streaking on breast and sides of bird in question did not have semi-necklace effect of Townsend's; olive of head and back much grayer; (3) female Prairie Warbler: bird in question had extended yellow post-ocular stripe; streaked breast, not just sides, and streaks bolder; had white belly; (4) fall Blackpoll Warbler: bird in question was much more boldly streaked on breast and sides; had extended post-ocular yellow stripe, clearly defined cheek patch.

All of above eliminated due to bird in question having wings similar to back color and not of a contrasting charcoal, as well as having a bold yellow-olive rump. All but Prairie Warbler eliminated due to bird in question's virtual lack of wing bars.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about the identification? No.

Viewing conditions: Viewed from indoors through a picture window onto a feeding platform no more than nine or ten feet away. Bird was in bright afternoon winter sun when perched outside the covered feeding platform, a little more shaded when inside the feeding space (though not enough to be a factor). Very long looks, both through binoculars and with the naked eye.

Previous experience with this species and similar ones: None with Cape May; thirty-three other wood warblers positively identified.

References and persons consulted before writing description: National Geographic Society field guide, on site. Casual conferrals with Bill Scheible as we watched. Bird was sought out on a lead from Jim Durbin, an experienced birder, who had viewed and identified the bird the previous day.

How long before field notes made: No field notes.

How long before this form completed: Four hours.