

Gray-cheeked Thrush  
24 Apr 1983  
Waubonsie State Park, Fremont Co., IA  
\*Charlotte Scott  
exceptionally early; IBL 54:39

Record Number: 83-26  
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Charlotte Scott

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn, 21 June 1983 (included with review)

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 54:39

VOTE: 4-IV, 1-V, 2-VI

IV, Viewer seems to have some doubts too.

VI, Date unlikely. Nothing in description to convince me that it wasn't a Hermit Thrush.

IV, Description not detailed enough. Did not consider Hermit Thrush.

IV, Charlotte does not give enough details to support or deny identification.

IV, Date indeed ties early date for Iowa (April 23, 25, 26). At this time, confusion with Hermit Thrush possible-observer states back appeared browner than she remembered. Lack of eyering would favor Gray-cheeked, however, close decision between III & IV.

V, Hermit Thrush more likely because of date and brown color of back. Could be eliminated by tail color, which can be hard to see on these shy birds and is not recorded here.

83-26  
105-K E. Ticonderoga Dr.  
Westerville, OH 43081  
21 June 1983

Dear Tom:

I'm looking forward to the I.C.U. meeting in October. I'll let you know about my travel plans and provide you with some slides at a later date.

My thoughts on the documentations are as follows:

Mississippi Kite: definitely a Northern Harrier

Black-legged Kittiwake: definitely a first-year Ring-billed Gull!  
The absence of head and nape markings, bill color and tail shape eliminate the possibility of a kittiwake.

Laughing Gull: the description does not eliminate a sub-adult Franklin's Gull (which would have a similar wing pattern with no white separating the gray mantle from the black primaries.) Since she did not describe bill and leg color or the black hood in detail, I cannot accurately age this bird (and hence cannot identify it to species). Given its location in extreme western Iowa, I would imagine that a Franklin's would be much more likely.

Black-headed Grosbeak: another problematical grosbeak sighting that does not sit very well with me. The description of the underparts is suggestive of a Black-head but is not detailed enough to be conclusive (the observer should have mentioned the belly and described the streaking pattern in more detail). The white eye line is suggestive of a Rose-breast. In addition, the observer was not familiar with the species and appeared rather indecisive with her own identification. Given these facts, I don't think this written description provides a conclusive basis for identifying this bird to either species.

Whooping Crane: I have a number of problems with this sighting. First, the fact the observer was a non-birder who observed the bird at a distance of 100 yards without binoculars makes me wonder about the accuracy of the description (could he accurately determine bill and leg color at that distance?). Secondly, the crane he described was a first-year bird that should still be accompanying its parents (by the way there were only 2 or 3 young produced last year out of the 70 or so cranes in the Aransas flock). Thirdly, it is rather unlikely that this species would be feeding along the shore of a man-made lake. Lastly, I invariably receive 1 or 2 Whooping Crane reports from somewhere in the Region each year (I also received 1 from Indiana this spring). These reports always come from casual or non-birders in very unlikely locations. While it is conceivable that an occasional crane might stray into extreme western Iowa or Missouri, such a sighting must be thoroughly described by a number of active birders (and hopefully accompanied by photos) before I will accept it.



Western Grebe: the description is pretty good for a light-phase bird. The best field mark is the head pattern which he described perfectly (white lores and white extending above the eye). The bill color is a little troublesome; light-phased grebes have orange-yellow bills while dark-phase birds have greenish-yellow bills. However, the description of a "bright yellow" bill is closer to a light-phase bird. Another characteristic that is frequently useful is back color. Light-phase birds have a grayish back that is lighter than the nape (as was accurately described for this bird); dark-phase grebes have uniformly black upperparts and nape. The best article describing these color phases is found in Western Birds (1981, Vol. 12 (1), pp. 41-46); I can send you a copy if you're interested.

Eastern Wood Pewee: very marginal description (so marginal that I probably won't include it in my report). I have problems with any pewee described as a black and white bird (the upperparts certainly aren't black and the underparts aren't uniformly white). In addition, Empidonax flycatchers frequently lack eye rings. Given this brief and inaccurate description and the observers apparent inexperience, I would have to describe this sighting as questionable at best.

Gray-cheeked Thrush: another questionable sighting. The rusty tail of a Hermit can be rather difficult to view (especially for young birds in poor light). They also failed to mention the gray cheek patch. Given their inexperience, this sighting would best be treated as Catharus sp.

Several miscellaneous comments on some observations:

Yellow Rails: while the descriptions seem to come out of a field guide, from my experience, Yellow Rails look nothing like those pictured in the books. For example, they are not yellow at all but have cream-colored underparts and tan or buffy upperparts with rather indistinct dark streaks. If Iowa observers are seeing yellow-colored rails, I do not know what they are looking at.

Long-billed Dowitcher: basic plumaged long-bills cannot be identified by bill length and wing covert edgings!!!! I would suggest Mike Newlon read Pitelka's excellent monograph on the genus Limnodromus (1948, U. California Publ. Zool. 50: 1-108). before he attempts further identifications of dowitchers. While fall juveniles and breeding plumaged adults can be safely identified with caution (don't use the misinformation in the field guides), winter plumaged birds in migration cause real problems. I don't know of any proven field identification techniques for these dowitchers. (This letter is too long already, I will defer further discussion until October). Many birders are having similar problems. This spring, one state in the Region reported more long-bills than short-bills which is preposterous.

Godwits: I totally agree with your comment on godwit identification. Any May sighting of 46 godwits in this Region must certainly be Hudsonians.

than call notes

Tom Kent  
June 21, 1983  
page 3

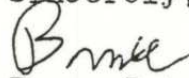
I have several requests:

1. Can you send me a better copy (or the original) of the Chestnut-collared Longspur documentation? I can't read the copy you sent me.
2. Can you send me a photo of the Vermilion Flycatcher? While a Vermilion Flycatcher should be unmistakable, there was a partially melanistic Scarlet Tanager in New York this spring that had a plumage pattern identical to a Vermilion Flycatcher (and was originally identified as one until someone familiar with both species saw the bird).

I will return both the photo and original <sup>longspur documentation</sup> promptly. I will feel more comfortable including both sightings in my spring report if I can study the available evidence in better detail.

I hope this information is useful to you. (I also hope it makes sense; it is getting quite late and I should have gone to bed long ago). Let me know if I can provide further assistance.

Sincerely,



Bruce Peterjohn



Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation

83-26

by the Records Committee

of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH

DATE SEEN: 24 April 1983

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Fremont County

OBSERVERS: Charlotte Scott

DATE OF REVIEW: 1983

METHOD OF REVIEW: Mailing to Committee

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: VI

COMMENTS: The date of this observation indeed would be very early for Iowa, and so careful examination of the details was required. The Committee was bothered by the mention of a "brown-gray" back, and the doubts expressed by the observer. It was noted that the description included "rather distinct and separate splotches on the breast". These points, together with the early date, raised the question in the Committee's mind as to whether the bird may have been a Hermit Thrush. Light conditions can have a strong bearing on the coloration of thrushes in woods, and no comments were submitted regarding lighting during the observation.

While the outcome of this documentation and that relating to Eastern Wood-Pewee is somewhat discouraging to the observer, the Committee is grateful that early records are being submitted and encourages the observer to continue doing so.

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.

DOCUMENTATION FORM

SCOTT

What species? Gray-cheeked Thrush How many? 1

83-26

VI

Location? Waubonsie State Park

Type of habitat? Near a trail through a high wooded section

When? 9:45 A. M., April 24, 1983

Who? Charlotte Scott, 320 E. Lee, Seymour, Iowa 52590

others with you: Dick Scott

Describe the bird including only what you observed.

The bird flew from the ground to a low branch (3' from ground) as we approached and sat perfectly still for 10-15 sec. I had time to observe a smaller than robin-sized, plump-looking bird--<sup>seriously</sup> brown-gray. I had my glasses on him long enough to check that there was not a distinct eye ring and that the splotches on his breast were distinct and separate--not blurry--and fairly bold. The bird flew a short distance and dropped back to the ground. I was not able to flush him again.

At this time I checked BIRDS OF AMERICA and Peterson. There was no question in my mind but that he was a thrush, but I thought this bird more brown on his back than I remembered Gray-cheeked to be. I considered Veery, but stayed with my original call.

ANNOTATED BIRDS gives an early date of April 8.