

Black-headed Grosbeak
29 Jul 1982
near Decorah, Winneshiek Co., IA
*Jeri McMahon
IBL 53:36

Record Number: 82-29
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Jeri McMahon

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 53:36

VOTE: 3-III, 3-IV, 1-V

hybrid ?, rej. as sp.

III, might be hybrid, can't tell.

IV, see 82-25, few details. Obs. experienced however.

IV, same problems 82-25.

III, Apparently the observer is familiar with the Black-headed and the problem of separating females and imm. of that species from the Rose-breasted. The observer also had ample opportunity to study the bird. Yet it is hard to escape the feeling that the Black-headed Grosbeak is becoming another "Thayer's Gull".

V, Also probable, but description not as definite as 82-25 -- location less likely. Need better description of face and head pattern and bill size and shape.

VOTE (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.

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: 29 July 1982

SITE OF OBSERVATION: near Decorah, Winneshiek Co., IA

OBSERVERS: Jeri McMahon

DATE OF REVIEW: 4 October 1982

METHOD OF REVIEW: mail vote

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: IV

COMMENTS: The committee found that, while the bird was probably not a rose-breasted grosbeak, the evidence was not sufficient to rule out the possibility of a hybrid rose-breasted x black headed grosbeak. Such hybrids occur commonly not far west of Iowa, and would be expected to stray to Iowa on occasion. Descriptions of the plumages of these hybrid grosbeaks can be found in the Wilson Bulletin, vol. 86, pp 1-11, and in 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.

82-29
August 19, 1982

Dear Mr. Kent,

I hope this isn't too late to send in to "American Birds". I didn't know your address or I would have sent it sooner.

I live in Oklahoma, but I visit my parents every summer in Greene, Iowa. I try to get in as much birding as possible while I'm there. My father goes trout fishing in Decorah, so I always go with him and bird all day. (One day I totaled 49 species.)

On July 29, 1982, I spotted a female black-headed grosbeak. Since this bird is out of its normal range, I thought it should be reported. I saw it at Trout River, near Decorah. I had very good views of it. It seemed to be a dull burnt orange or buffy color all over; face was heavily patterned; there were stripes on the back; but the breast wasn't streaked at all, except for a tiny bit on the sides. The female rose-breasted grosbeak, plus juveniles, were also present that day, so I could compare the 2 species very well. It was not an im. male rose-breasted, although I saw several of those.

I might add, I lived in Santa Barbara, Ca., for 18 years before moving to Ok., so I am very familiar with black-headed grosbeaks. Since one was seen in Madison, Wisc., June 30, 1981, as reported in the Nov. '81 issue of "American Birds", I know this is a probable sighting, although extremely rare.

My uncle, Lowell Maxson, (who is a backyard birder) also saw this bird that day. (He and my father were trout fishing). He saw it at close range, just as I did.

Another good find for N. Iowa, was the summer tanager. They are plentiful here in Ok., but I've never seen them in N. Iowa before. I was in Marble Rock, Ia., July 26, '82, at Ackley Creek Park. I saw a female tanager, and naturally thought it was a scarlet. I kept studying it though (as best I could through the trees) and thought the wings were not dark enough for a scarlet, and the call note was definitely not a scarlet. It looked just like a summer tanager, but I didn't think that could be possible. Then, on Aug. 3, I returned to Marble Rock, and I heard the summer tanager singing---no mistake about it! It was clear and beautiful, not hoarse as is the scarlet tanager's voice. I was then positive that summer tanagers were present in the area.

Also, on Aug. 3, I saw 5 black terns along the Shell Rock River in Greene, and the only shorebirds I could find were four solitary sandpipers, 1 semi-palmated sandpiper, and of course, spotted sandpipers.

I observed a Swainson's Hawk in Decorah, July 29, but that probably isn't unusual.

Hope this information will help you.

Sincerely,

Jeri McMahon
Rt. 2, Box 908
Fort Gibson, Ok. 74434

P.S. I got a "lifer" in Decorah this year----the blue-winged warbler. I was so excited!

(I wrote to Bruce Peterson for your address)