

Proceedings of the Minnesota Ornithological Records Committee

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Before listing the records voted on during the last half of 1988, there were several topics of discussion at our 4 December 1988 meeting which I have summarized below.

1) It was decided that records of casuals and accidentals documented with a photograph, specimen or sound recording would be voted on from now on; formerly, such records supported by "clearly identifiable" photos, specimens or recordings were accepted without a vote.

2) Bill Pieper moved out of state during 1988 and he decided to resign from the Committee. He was replaced by alternate member Terry Savaloja, and Terry's former place as an alternate has not yet been filled at the time of this writing (Tom Tustison had been named to fill this vacancy, but unfortunately he too has recently moved out of state).

3) Although House Finch is still officially listed as a Casual species on the state list, there have been so many records in recent months, especially in the Twin Cities, it was decided that a vote is no longer needed on all records. It will be up to the discretion of the Chairman to decide which records will still require documentation and/or a vote; this decision will depend on the experience of the observers and the location of the observation, with records in western and northern Minnesota tending to require a vote more often.

4) Minnesota's three Acceptable Anhinga records were discussed, and it was decided a new vote should be taken on all three records, especially after an observer involved in one of the records indicated he felt his record should be withdrawn. As discussed below, all three records were found Unacceptable, and the species has now been removed from the Minnesota list. The official list now stands at 403 species after the deletions of Anhinga and Mountain Plover and the addition of Magnificent Frigatebird (listed below under Acceptable records).

5) The identification of Clark's Grebe was discussed, since some doubt remains about the validity and variation of some of the field marks. It was decided to request additional

input from out-of-state "experts" on the 11 possible Minnesota Clark's Grebe records (four of these have been voted on and are currently Unacceptable, three have been voted Acceptable, and four have not yet been voted on by the Committee). After these expert opinions have been received, some records may be reconsidered, and an article in *The Loon* will update the identification and Minnesota status of this species.

6) The identification and Minnesota status of another problem species, the Western Sandpiper, was also discussed. Although this species is currently recognized as Regular on the Minnesota list, its true status and relative abundance is unknown — it may prove to be only Casual — primarily because other species are often misidentified as Westerns, because so few sight records have been satisfactorily documented, and because, at the time of this writing, there are no known Western Sandpiper photos or specimens taken in Minnesota. As a result, until this species' status becomes clarified, all Western Sandpiper records must be documented by the observers and voted on by the Committee. Also, if anyone knows of any past photographic or specimen records of Western Sandpiper in Minnesota, they are asked to submit these records to the Committee.

When identifying a sandpiper suspected of being a Western, please note the following:

—Although Western Sandpipers in breeding or alternate plumage should be obvious and pose little difficulty, and birds in Minnesota in winter or basic plumage can cause some confusion, most of the problems involves juvenile "peeps" seen in Minnesota during fall migration.

—Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpipers are often misidentified as Westerns because they may have rusty feather edges on the scapulars, back or tertials, and because female Semipalmateds can have bills which overlap the length and "drooping" shape of the Western.

—Juvenile Least Sandpipers are also easily misidentified as Westerns; they also have ob-

vious rusty feather edges on the upperparts, their bills are decurved, and their legs can easily appear black when muddy or when seen in poor light or at a distance.

—Dunlins and White-rumped Sandpipers when in juvenile plumage or when molting from juvenile into winter/basic plumage are also possible sources of confusion: both have bills which droop at the tip, black legs and rusty feather edges on the upperparts; also the underparts streaking on breeding/alternate plumaged White-rumped and Westerns is similar and may also lead to misidentification.

—A peep in full winter/basic plumage in Minnesota that appears to be a Semipalmated or Western, is almost certainly *not* a Semi, since Semipalmateds in this plumage are seldom if ever seen this far north; however, be aware that winter/basic plumaged Sanderlings can easily be miscalled Westerns.

—Do *not* attempt to identify a Western with the aid of the Peterson or Robbins or even, surprisingly enough, the Geographic field guides; all three, especially the first two, are inadequate in their coverage of this difficult identification problem.

—Do *not* attempt to identify a Western unless you have the aid of either or both of the following references: *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide to the Waders of the World* by Hayman, Marchant and Prater; and the article "Field Identification of Smaller Sandpipers Within the Genus *Calidris*" By Veit and Jonsson, published in *American Birds* 38:853-876 and reprinted in 41:212-236. Also highly recommended is the sandpipers section of Volume I of *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*; the photographs are especially helpful (although it should be noted that the winter plumaged Semipalmated Sandpiper photo is probably a Western).

—Finally, and perhaps most importantly, remember that Western Sandpiper identification is a difficult task and that there is no reason to feel defensive or frustrated or even angry if errors are made: many experienced birders, including this writer, have been misled into misidentifications until the three references recommended above became available.

The following records were voted on July-December 1988, and found to be Acceptable:

—Prothonotary Warbler, 8/1-5/87, near Park Rapids, Hubbard Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:129).

—Williamson's Sapsucker, 5/21-30/88, Itasca S.P., Hubbard Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:124-125).

—Sprague's Pipit, 6/26/88, near Aitkin, Aitkin Co. (vote 5-2; *The Loon* 60:187).

—Blue Grosbeak, 7/1-7/88, Felton Prairie, Clay Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:129-130).

—Least Tern, 7/30/88, Lake Wilson, Murray Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:135).

—White-faced Ibis, 4/23/88, Salt L., Lac Qui Parle Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:137).

—Laughing Gull, 5/5/88, Duluth, St. Louis Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:134).

—Baird's Sparrow, 6/24/88, Felton prairie, Clay Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:132-133).

—Great Black-backed Gull, 5/5/88, Duluth, St. Louis Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:134).

—House Finch, 6/15-8/6/88, Albert Lea, Freeborn Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:186).

—Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, 8/2-8/88, near Ely, St. Louis Co. (vote 7/0; *The Loon* 60:179-180).

—Ruff, 8/9-14/88, French L., Hennepin Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:181).

—Greater Scaup, 9/14/88, Sleepy Eye, Brown Co. (vote 6-1).

—Ruff, 8/21/88, Geis L., Scott Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:181).

—Say's Phoebe, 9/26/88, near Rochester, Olmsted Co. (vote 7/0; *The Loon* 60:180-181).

—Black-legged Kittiwake, 11/8/88, Hastings, Dakota Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:187-188).

—Long-billed Curlew, 10/9/88, near L. Swenoda, Pope Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:186).

—Red-throated Loon, 5/27/88, Duluth, St. Louis Co., (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:186).

—Pacific Loon, 10/21/88, Duluth, St. Louis Co. (vote 7-0).

—Carolina Wren, 10/29-30/88, Coon Rapids, Anoka Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 60:188-189).

—Magnificent Frigatebird, 10/1/88, Acacia Cemetery, Dakota Co. (vote 10-0;). All ten members vote in cases of potential first state records.

—Louisiana Waterthrush, 8/9/88, Lake Bronson S.P., Kittson Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 61:46-47)

—Lesser Black-backed Gull, 9/11-14/88, Diamond L., Hennepin Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 61:44-45).

—King Eider, 10/30-11/2/88, Grand Marais,

Cook Co. (vote 7-0; *The Loon* 61:38-39).

The following records were voted on July-December 1988, and found to be Unacceptable:

—Greater Scaup, 7/9/88, Carlos Avery WMA, Anoka Co. (vote 3-4).

Although it was agreed the observer may well have seen a Greater Scaup, the majority felt not enough was seen to eliminate Lesser Scaup. The identification was based on impressions of bill and body sizes, but there was no direct comparison available with anything to make these impressions diagnostic. The only other useful mark noted was the "flat-crowned" head-shape which tends to suggest Lesser Scaup more than Greater; also this scaup was apparently in eclipse plumage when head shape is unreliable.

—Cassin's Finch, 4/7/88, Crosby, Crow Wing Co. (vote 0-7).

It was agreed that the described face pattern, overall size, bill shape and undertail coverts all indicated this may well have been a female Cassin's Finch. The problem is that the observers were unable to see the bird long enough and well enough to provide a completely detailed description of these and other field marks. It was learned from the 1987 Duluth record that Cassin's vs. Purple Finch identification requires long and careful scrutiny of the bird involved along with good photos or meticulous written details, none of which were possible in this case.

—Mountain Plover, 7/2-5/86, Faribault Co. (vote 0-10; *The Loon* 58:154-158).

See *The Loon* 60:146-148 for a summary of why this previously accepted and published record was reconsidered; all ten members vote in cases of potential first state records.

—House Finch, 5/14/88, Golden Valley, Hennepin Co. (vote 1-6).

The identification was only based on the bird's song, which was not described in enough detail to eliminate Purple Finch.

—Osprey, 3/6/88, near Albert Lea, Freeborn Co. (vote 3-4).

The sketchy description only mentioned the wing profile and black wrist patches; the majority voted not to accept because the possibility of Rough-legged Hawk was not eliminated by these details.

—Northern Wheatear, 9/10/88, Maple Grove, Hennepin Co. (vote 0-7).

Although the description of the rump and tail would seem to indicate a wheatear, the ob-

server did not use binoculars during the observation, and none of the rest of the plumage was described; it was felt such an unusual species should have more complete documentation.

—Black-headed Grosbeak, 9/17/88, Minneapolis, Hennepin Co. (vote 0-7). The identification of this presumed female was based only on the "mostly" unstreaked "golden yellow" underparts; however, juvenile male Rose-breasteds can also match this pattern, and it is necessary to observe the color of the under wing linings to separate these two.

—House Finch, 7/31/88, Golden Valley, Hennepin Co. (vote 3-4).

It was agreed that this may well have been a female or immature House Finch, especially since so many had been in the Twin Cities recently; however, the undertail coverts were described as unstreaked which would tend to eliminate House Finch, and the tail appeared to be too deeply notched for a House Finch.

—House Finch, 3-31-4/18/88, Austin, Mower Co. (vote 0-7).

The identification of this female was based entirely on a less distinct facial pattern; however, the observer did not explain how he eliminated immature Purple Finch or Pine Siskin or even female Cassin's Finch, all of which have an indistinct face pattern.

—Anhinga, 7/22/88, Stewartville, Olmsted Co. (vote 1-6).

This identification was based on its wing-drying posture and orange-colored bill, but the observers apparently were unaware that cormorants dry their wings in the same way and that the orange at the base of their bill can make the bill itself appear orange. In flight the neck was described as "slightly bent," which also fits cormorant, and, even though the bird was seen perched at close range, there was no mention of the obvious white spotting on the wing coverts which even immature Anhingas would show.

Acadian Flycatcher, 7/15/88, Black Dog L., Dakota Co. (vote 1-6).

This Empidonax was identified solely on the basis of its plumage; there was no direct comparison with any other bird, and more importantly no vocalization was ever heard. Nothing in the description eliminated the more likely possibility of an early fall migrant Alder Flycatcher.

—Pine Grosbeak, 6/30/88, Sax-Zim bog, St. Louis Co. (vote 3-4).

Although it was agreed the identification may well have been correct, the majority had too many doubts about the record since there was no mention of why White-winged Crossbill was eliminated, and the brief details also failed to mention anything about the observer's experience with the species, the light conditions, the duration of the observation, or the distance involved.

—Pine Grosbeak, 6/11/88, Sturgeon Lake, Pine Co. (vote 1-6).

Although this record's documentation was more detailed than the Sax-Zim record, there were still too many uncertainties for the majority to accept. The observer had no experience with this species, and the somewhat vague details were unclear about the presence or absence of wing bars and about how the bird's "much larger" size was determined.

—Anhinga, 9/20/82, Duluth, St. Louis Co. (vote 0-10; *The Loon* 55:28-30).

—Anhinga, 5/26/84, Louisville Swamp, Scott Co. (vote 1-9; *The Loon* 56:203).

—Anhinga, 4/27/85, near Buffalo, Wright Co. (vote 1-9; *The Loon* 58:46).

All ten members vote in cases of potential first state records. The observers in all three records based their identifications on: a long tail about the same length as the head and

neck, with two of the birds fanning their tails out at times; a thin, straight neck tapering into a small head, giving a "headless" impression; and a soaring, buteo-like flight with wings stretched out flat. At the time of these sightings none of the observers or M.O.R.C. members voting for the records felt that Double-crested Cormorant, the only similar species, could duplicate the shape and flight described. However, in September 1988, one of the observers saw a flock of about 30 cormorants flying over Hawk Ridge in Duluth: many had a tail which appeared the same as the neck-head length, and, more importantly, some of the birds clearly fanned their tails when circling overhead; some individuals held their necks out perfectly straight, with no characteristic cormorant "crook" in the neck, leaving an impression of neck, head and bill tapering to a point; and, when soaring, the cormorants' wings appeared long and flat. On the basis of this sighting, the observer withdrew his earlier Anhinga record, and the Committee felt that the other two records should similarly be found Unacceptable since Double-crested Cormorant was not precluded. 9735 North Shore Dr., Duluth, MN 55804



BOOK REVIEWS

ATLAS OF WINTERING NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS: An Analysis of Christmas Bird Count Data; by Terry Root, 1988. University of Chicago Press, Foreword by Chandler S. Robbins, 312 pages, 596 maps, soft-bound, \$35.00, hard-cover, \$60.00.

Have you ever wondered why — when it is ten degrees below zero and that bone-chilling Alberta Clipper cuts right through your Sorels, long underwear, wool pants and your

double-knit ski socks — you volunteered to participate in a Christmas Bird Count? If so, Terry Root's new book, *Atlas of Wintering North American Birds*, will help provide you with an answer. Ten years of Christmas Bird Count data (1963-1972) from 1282 count sites across the United States and southern Canada have been analyzed and summarized into accounts describing the winter distribution of 508 species. Unique contour and three-dimensional maps depicting both range and