

SECOND UTAH BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE REPORT*

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Correct identification of birds in the field can be an intriguing and exciting challenge. Often identification is straight-forward and simple. The breeding male Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Yellow-headed Blackbird, with their distinctive plumage and lack of look-alike species, almost defy misidentification even by a novice. At other times, identification can be quite complex. Even those who have spent years studying particular groups such as gulls and flycatchers often find individual birds which they feel are impossible to correctly identify in the field or even in the hand. The Utah Bird Records Committee must evaluate records of birds which vary in complexity of identification from those that are very easy to those that are extremely difficult. As stated in a previous Committee report (*Utah Birds* 1(1):11), the Utah Bird Records Committee will regularly seek advice from outside authorities when dealing with some of the more difficult identifications. Each member of the Committee strongly encourages observers who suspect that they may have seen one of the more challenging rarities to become actively involved in this consultation process. It is fun and educational. The observer may personally contact an authority and submit the correspondence together with his/her written description of the bird, or the observer may prefer to have a Committee member correspond with an authority or authorities and send a copy of that correspondence to the observer who can then decide whether or not to formally submit the record to the Committee. Sometimes the observer learns that certain field marks used in the identification were unreliable, or that he/she needs more experience with the common Utah species of similar appearance and their variations in plumage and voice.

The observer may then decide not to formally submit the record or review. Records sent to the Committee but not formally submitted for review are stored in a separate file, so that data is not lost. All Committee members are willing to help observers in any way they can. They will be glad to share their own field experiences, and suggest articles on identification of particular species, if available. Specimen collections can also be consulted.

After reviewing all information on a submitted record, the Committee will make a decision whether or not to accept the record. Authorities sometimes disagree, and Committee decisions are not always unanimous. Anyone who has additional information on a sighting or feels that the reasons given for a decision in a Records Committee Report are based on insufficient information is encouraged to submit their comments in writing to the Committee. The Committee will then reevaluate the record based on the new information.

The following two examples show how the Committee and an observer can work together on an identification. On 3 November 1985 Jim Woolf observed a grosbeak in Parley's Gulch in Salt Lake City. He took detailed notes during the sighting and felt that the bird more closely resembled a female or immature male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a rare transient in Utah, than a Black-headed Grosbeak which is a common summer resident. Woolf contacted a Committee member and learned that the Rose-breasted Grosbeak would be the most likely species to occur

in Utah in November, based on verified records for states adjacent to Utah, even though there are far fewer records of Rose-breasted Grosbeak than Black-headed Grosbeak. On 5 November, immediately after looking at numerous specimens of Black-headed Grosbeak, Woolf returned to Parley's Gulch and found the grosbeak perched on the same branch and again noted all the characteristics that he had recorded two days previously. These marks included a boldly and extensively streaked breast, quite unlike any he had noted on the Black-headed Grosbeak specimens that he had just observed. On 6 November Clyde Morris located the bird in Parley's Gulch and also identified it as a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. He felt that there was some light wash across the breast beneath the coarse streaking. Both observers stressed the immaculate whiteness of the belly. The color of the underwing lining was not observed, which would have been helpful in determining whether the bird was a female or immature male. All Black-headed Grosbeaks and female Rose-breasted Grosbeaks have yellowish underwing linings, while all male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks have reddish underwing linings. Two authorities with extensive field experience with these two species were contacted. Both stressed that the Rose-breasted Grosbeak was the more likely species to occur in Utah in November, and both felt that the observed field marks could be used to reliably separate the two species.

On 15 September 1985 Joe Leigh observed a bird near the Salt Lake International Airport which he felt might be a Clay-colored Sparrow. After consulting with a Committee member, a decision was made to send a written description of the bird to Allan Phillips and Paul Lehman. Phillips suggested that Leigh visit a museum and look at specimens, stating that it is not an easy matter to identify this species correctly. Phillips stated that a few years ago he checked a specimen of one of the easternmost records of a Brewer's Sparrow, a specimen on which everyone had agreed on the identification, and found that it was really a Clay-colored Sparrow. Phillips said that it is usually the wide black stripes on the head and the strong contrast between the grays and browns that usually identify the Clay-colored Sparrow, but that a subspecies of Brewer's Sparrow (*taverneri*) also has broad, black streaking. He said that he has personally confused the *taverneri* race of Brewer's Sparrow with the Clay-colored Sparrow. Phillips, an ornithologist with extensive experience with specimens of these two sparrows, reaffirmed that identification of these sparrows is complex.

Paul Lehman, who consulted with Jon Dunn on his evaluation, gave the following comments.

"This is an interesting record; however I do not feel comfortable assigning a name to the bird in question. I believe the bird was either a Clay-colored Sparrow or a juvenile Brewer's Sparrow. Juvenile Brewer's are more strongly marked and warmer colored than adults; while they do not typically show a median crown stripe I have seen a few individuals with a faint stripe at least in forehead region. So, this bird seems to have a bolder median crown stripe than a typical Brewer's, although Clay-colored's median stripe is typically whitish, not 'grayish'. Most fall Clay-colored's tend to show buffer breasts than this bird (although not all) and an even bolder facial pattern. What is important is that two important field marks for Clay-colored were not seen/mentioned: 1) a distinct whitish malar stripe (bordered by a thinner dark line), and 2) a distinct gray collar contrasting with the warm brown crown and back.

"So, in sum, I do not believe the bird was described well enough to ascertain that it was a Clay-colored. It may have been one, but it also may have been a juvenile Brewer's."

Both the grosbeak and sparrow examples have been used with permission of the observers who

have remained open and receptive and very much a part of the consultation process. Woolf has submitted his written documentation to the Records Committee for review, and is attempting to locate two observers that he met on 9 November in Parley's Gulch who also mentioned seeing the grosbeak. It would be desirable to add the details of their sighting to those of Woolf and Morris, particularly if they noted the color of the underwing linings.

Leigh plans to visit a museum as suggested by Phillips and look at specimens, particularly the subspecies *taverneri*. He felt that he learned a great deal from Lehman's evaluation, especially additional field marks to look for in future sightings. He has additional questions about median stripe coloration, length, and immature plumage which Lehman has willingly agreed to answer. As previously stated, with an open mind, exploring the possibilities can be fun, intriguing, and educational. The Committee hopes that other observers will become actively involved with them in the evaluation of records. The Committee has set up a filing and numbering system for records and hopes to become current on its evaluations by the next issue of *Utah Birds*. We ask for the continued patience of the many observers who have submitted records. It has been a somewhat overwhelming task to get the records organized and evaluated.

The Committee has made the decision to use the recently published *Utah Birds: A Revised Checklist* by Behle, Sorensen, and White (1985) as the basis for future records evaluations, and to accept all records listed therein. The Committee will only review records included therein if the Committee receives a written request giving valid reasons why the record should be re-examined. An exception will be those records which are listed in Appendix II of the *Utah Bird Distribution: Latilong Study* (1983). The Utah Bird Records Committee is a continuation of the Latilong Records Sub-committee which first met on 20 July 1983. At that committee meeting, a decision was made to consult out-of-state on the records of the following species: American Woodcock, Philadelphia Vireo, Prairie Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, and Baird's Sparrow. There has been considerable interest in the final disposition of those records. Several of the evaluations contained so much useful information on the field identification of those species that the Committee felt that it would be desirable to devote this report to those records.

ACCEPTED RECORDS

SCARLET TANAGER (*Piranga olivacea*). Specimen of a male taken at St. George, Washington Co., on 17 June 1950; consulted: Roxie Laybourne.

The record specimen, identified at the time of collection as a Scarlet Tanager, was preserved for some time as a mount, but was subsequently destroyed except for several groups of breast feathers which were saved for use as fishing flies. Many years later, those feathers were given to Dr. William Behle by Dean Stock and were deposited in the University of Utah Natural History Museum. In 1983 several feathers were sent to Roxie Laybourne, who can often identify a bird when only a few feathers are available and who is considered to be a leading expert in that field. To positively identify the specimen as a Scarlet Tanager, Laybourne had to rule out other red birds that occur in the St. George area, namely Summer Tanager and Vermilion Flycatcher which are summer residents, as well as Hepatic Tanager. Laybourne judged that the feathers were unlike Summer or Hepatic Tanager which were ruled out macroscopically. However, since the feathers were the same size and color pattern as Vermilion Flycatcher, a microscopic examination was necessary that showed that the microscopic structure of the downy barbules was that of a Scarlet Tanager. This specimen, on deposit in the University of Utah Natural

History Museum, represents the only verified record of Scarlet Tanager for Utah.

UNACCEPTED RECORDS

AMERICAN WOODCOCK (*Scolopax minor*). One; 22 December 1981; Kanab, Kane Co.; consulted: Guy McCaskie, Kenn Kaufman, Charles Chase III, Lawrence Balch, Harry LeGrand. This record has been the subject of considerable controversy since it was first observed by a member of the Utah Bird Records Committee. The observer sent the record to several consultants, most of who felt that the written documentation adequately described a woodcock. The record has appeared in several publications as an accepted record, and is the only report of the species in Utah. In a recent letter to the Committee, the observer expressed his decision to retract the record for the following reasons: 1) the dark markings on the head, nape, and scapulars were not observed, 2) the flight was not as fluttery as expected of a typical woodcock, and 3) the bird was not observed on the ground. Several of the consultants for this record also questioned the missed field marks, but only one considered them to be essential for identification. However, the observer felt that all essential field marks should have been observed for this record to be acceptable as a first state record, particularly since it was a single observer sighting. He felt "strongly that there can be no room for error on a first state record, no matter who the observer or his experience".

PHILADELPHIA VIREO (*Vireo philadelphicus*). One; 10 October 1981; Brown's Canyon, San Juan Co.; consulted: Guy McCaskie, Jon Barlow, Ross James.

Two observers submitted documentation on this sighting. Three authorities reviewed the record and none recommended acceptance. The first observer stated that the bird "appeared slimmer than a Solitary or Warbling Vireo", but all consultants commented that Warbling and Philadelphia vireos are essentially the same size and shape. The upperparts were described as being bright olive-green, which is brighter than the usually described gray-green of Philadelphia Vireo. According to McCaskie, most, if not all, fall-plumaged Philadelphia Vireos show a faint wingbar formed by the narrow pale tips of the greater wing coverts, but the observers stated that there was no wing bar. The Philadelphia Vireo, like most other species of North American vireos, has relatively pale blue-gray legs, not dark as stated in the description. The bird was described as having a pale yellow breast, white belly, and relatively bright undertail coverts. In a Philadelphia Vireo, the center of the breast would be bright yellow and the bird would not have a white belly contrasting with bright yellow undertail coverts.

One point that was especially bothersome to two authorities who have studied vireos extensively was that the behavior of the bird was atypical of the Philadelphia Vireo. They stated that they had spent thousands of hours observing Philadelphia Vireos and had never seen ground foraging by that species. In the east, Philadelphia Vireos forage more in the tops of trees than in the lower levels near the ground.

The second written documentation was inconsistent with the first regarding the color of the underparts. The anterior two-thirds were described as being white-gray while the posterior one-third including coverts was bright yellow. The whiteness of the breast was again mentioned under Similar Species and was used to eliminate Orange-crowned Warbler as a possibility. If the bird did have a white or pale white-gray breast, then the chances of its being a Philadelphia Vireo are virtually zero!

PHILADELPHIA VIREO (*Vireo philadelphicus*). One; 29 April 1982; Provo, Utah Co.; consulted: Guy McCaskie, Jon Barlow, Paul Lehman, Ross James.

The description of this bird more closely fits a Philadelphia Vireo than a Warbling Vireo. However, vireos are in fresh plumage in the fall and acquire spring plumage through feather wear. Hence, the spring plumage is much less colorful than the fall plumage, and the breast should not appear vividly yellow. In spring, male Philadelphia Vireos should be singing. Philadelphia Vireos are fairly late spring migrants, usually arriving in the United States in late May. In the west, fall sightings greatly outnumber spring sightings. Monson and Phillips (1981) list only fall records for Arizona, and the few spring records for California are 24-25 May, 26-27 May, 27-30 May, 14 May, and 12 June (Roberson 1980, Garrett and Dunn 1981). The 29 April date is exceptionally early and, as such, the Committee felt that better documentation was necessary. There are no acceptable records of Philadelphia Vireo for Utah, but the species is not unexpected.

PRAIRIE WARBLER (*Dendroica discolor*). One; 28-29 June 1982; Mendon, Cache Co.; consulted: Val Nolan Jr, J.W. Hardy, Ellen Ketterson.

The documentation for this record states that the identification was made on the basis of song and confirmed by brief views. On 29 June 1982, a sonogram was made, a copy of which was sent to Val Nolan for evaluation. Dr. Nolan has spent over 39 years studying this species and has written a book on Prairie Warblers which is considered to be a model for life histories. The following is an excerpt from his evaluation:

"When I looked at the sonogram, all but the last two or three phrases appeared as though they might have been sung by a Prairie Warbler, although the phrases preceding the final ones are run together more than I would have expected, even in the fastest Prairie Warbler trill. I then listened to the song and felt that the quality of the earlier phrases didn't sound like the Prairie, again presumably because they have no energy-free spaces in between them. Further, the last part of the song doesn't sound like any Prairie Warbler I have ever heard. I asked Ellen Ketterson, who did a full summer's field work studying Prairie Warbler song as a graduate student, to listen to the tape too, and she agrees with me.

"Both of us are reluctant to say that the song could not be a Prairie Warbler, even though we think it is not. We have been working on breeding juncos for several years, and every time we think we have heard the last and ultimate variation on a junco song, we hear a new, quite unfamiliar one. Nevertheless, I have heard hundreds of Prairies, and this doesn't resemble anything in my experience."

The habitat in which the bird was found is atypical for the species. In further correspondence with Nolan, he stated that "certainly I would not expect to find one in a very thick aspen stand." In this same letter, which was written after seeing the written documentation, he again concluded:

"To sum up, I don't know how rigorous you want your standards for sight records to be, and I certainly cannot say that another observer didn't see a Prairie Warbler. But on the evidence available to me (the tape recording and the sonogram) I would be very surprised if this bird was a Prairie Warbler."

Almost all records for Prairie Warbler in the west are fall records. A sighting on 28-29 June would be unexpected and would require excellent documentation for acceptance. This record was based on brief glimpses, the bird was observed in atypical habitat, and three ornithologists familiar with the species and its vocalizations would not endorse the sonogram as being that of a Prairie Warbler.

BAIRD'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus bairdii*). One; 1 May 1982; Antelope Island, Salt Lake Co.; consulted: James Rising, Guy McCaskie, Charles Chase III, Allan Phillips.

None of the four consultants felt that this record should be accepted. There are no acceptable records of this species in Utah, but with the breeding ground to the northeast and the wintering grounds to the south, the species undoubtedly occurs on occasion. Two of the evaluations contained so much useful information on the field identification of Baird's Sparrow that they will be published almost in their entirety.

"I must confess that I have seen the species only once myself, so my 'field impressions' are not strong. However, I do know Savannah Sparrows, and I did spend some time with their descriptions in hand while looking through our collection of some 50 (Baird's Sparrow) skins.

"A major point that all three mention is the abrupt ending of the breast streaking on the upper breast--indeed a characteristic of Baird's Sparrows, but also not uncommon in Savannah Sparrows, especially western ones.

"They emphasize that the tail was not forked, like that of a Savannah. Judging from the specimens, Baird's Sparrow too has a forked tail, and it is illustrated that way in my field guides. Also, they mention that there were no pale or white edges to the lateral rectrices. That, as they mention, is not universal in Baird's, but on the basis of our collections, I would say that it is usual, esp (sic) in the spring. Savannahs never have that white--thus in this way their description better fits Savannah Sparrow.

"A Savannah Sparrow would never be as yellow as they describe. The amount of yellow in the superciliary varies greatly, but, (esp (sic) in spring), it is essentially confined to the superciliary. On the other hand, if I can judge from the museum specimens, Baird's don't appear to be as yellow as they describe. That could be misleading, however, for I know that a nice, fresh bird in good light can be awfully bright. I have seen this in LeConte's Sparrow. I would never describe the Baird's yellow as yellow-orange.... It is ochre.

"They call the bill color 'dusky.' That's not very descriptive. But on the skins the bill color is a pale yellow, or 'straw' color.

"The size really bothers me. They all say that the Baird's was the same size as Vesper Sparrow, with which it was found. Baird's is quite noticeably smaller, and this would be obvious, esp (sic) if they were seen together. The dorsal surface of Baird's is not darker than Vesper, at least in our skins. About the same color, or if anything lighter.

"The wide yellow (or better, ochre) head stripe is not always a good mark of Baird's. Perhaps the majority of birds seem to lack it all together.... The striking thing about the stripe is that it is narrow and obscure close to the bill, and widens toward the back of the head--looks like a v-shaped ochre patch on the back of the head. There is a lot of variation in the width of the stripe in Savannah Sparrow, ranging to non-existent (as in many Baird's) to quite distinct--but never really wide, to my knowledge.

"In short, their description sounds more like a Baird's Sparrow than anything else, but it is not

convincing. I am especially concerned by three aspects of it, viz: (1) the emphasis on the pattern of breast streaking, which easily overlaps western Savannah Sparrows, (2) the size of the bird (it's too big), and the (3) yellowness, or yellow-orange--too yellow for this species. I think that the record cannot be accepted." (James Rising)

"I have reviewed the documentation on the supposed Baird's Sparrow and feel ... that the bird observed was NOT a Baird's Sparrow. I have encountered Baird's Sparrows in the grasslands of southeastern Arizona ...and in California. I have also taken the time to review the specimens of Baird's Sparrow in the San Diego Natural History Museum.

"On each occasion that I have encountered Baird's Sparrows I have been impressed by the bright buffy-orange coloration of the head, the noticeable pale edgings to the feathers of the upper-parts, and the pale edges to the tail feathers with the outer tail feathers looking to be whitish. In size the birds appear slightly larger than Savannah Sparrows, and I have never encountered the species associating with other birds. (Baird's Sparrows are loners).

"It is clear that none of the two observers submitting documentation had any prior experience with Baird's Sparrow, and all appeared to be relying on information presented in the standard field guides. In (one) account he states the Vesper Sparrow has white outer tail feathers, implying that the Baird's Sparrow does not have white outer tail feathers. I have noted whitish outer tail feathers on Baird's Sparrows in the field, and consider it a mark that separates it from the Savannah Sparrow (a check of specimens in the San Diego Natural History Museum confirms the fact that Baird's Sparrows do have whitish outer tail feathers). Had the bird under observation been a Baird's Sparrow I feel whitish tail feathers would have been noted, and the observer would NOT have calmly eliminated Vesper Sparrow on the basis of outer tail feather coloration.

"The (other) account states the bird was the same size as a Vesper Sparrow, which immediately suggests a bird larger than a Baird's Sparrow. The coloration of the head ('yellow-orange' and 'superficially resembled that of a fall Townsend's Warbler') suggests a bird much brighter about the head than a Baird's Sparrow, and the pattern (Townsend's Warbler like) suggests the bird had a noticeable ear patch, which would be wrong for Baird's Sparrow. The tail is described as 'medium long' and was 'dark brown to blackish'. The tail of a Baird's Sparrow appears proportionately short, and all the feathers are clearly edged with white with the outer tail feathers being entirely whitish (off white to a very pale brown), very different from that described by this observer. Again we learn that the upper-parts were 'dark brown with typical sparrow markings' which tells me very little (my descriptions of birds seen in the field all include the presence of the relatively conspicuous white edges to the otherwise dark feathers, this resulting in a somewhat 'scaley' pattern.

"I do not know what the observers saw, but feel it very unlikely from the descriptions submitted that it is a Baird's Sparrow". (Guy McCaskie)

Phillips and Chase both felt that characters described in the documentation were inconsistent with any known species. In addition, several important field marks of Baird's Sparrow were not mentioned.

In conclusion, we note the difficulty of dealing with descriptions that lack sufficient detail to permit a third person to rule out alternatives. Those observers who provide more detailed reports stand to make a more substantial contribution to our knowledge of Utah's birdlife.

The Committee would like to thank Paul Lehman who reviewed this report and offered many useful suggestions for improvement.

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