

Middlewest Prairie Region
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD

1. Species: Baird's Sparrow
2. Number: 1
3. Location: Wooded Island, Jackson Park, Chicago, Ill.
4. Date: May 23, 1989
5. Time Bird Seen: 10:45 A.M. to
6. Description of size, shape, and color patterns giving diagnostic characteristics, but including only what actually was seen in the field.

The bird was so striking because of its immaculateness or trimness. Every line and color seemed clear and distinct. No wishy-washy colors; overall color greyish, with no brown on the wings,

First, and most important, I saw the broad, yellowish crown stripe, flanked by narrow dark or black stripes. Peterson's word "ochre" is perfect. Knowing this stripe to be crucial, I confirmed both its width and its color. There was a very distinct yellowish tinge to the front half of the bird. I also saw the chain of streaks around the breast, but did not pay them as much attention as I should have.

Behind the eye, about a centimeter away, was a small dark spot or dot. This was distinct in its ochreish background and looked like a crucial field mark, although Peterson does not call attention to it. He also shows that the spot is preceded by a narrow triangular marking from the eye. In spite of the very clear light, I did not notice this, and the spot appeared to be isolated on the side of the face.

One feature of the bird's neatness was the distinctness of the white stripe on the back. Peterson shows them clearly enough but (in that light, again) they were brighter, fresher-looking, worth noting in the Guide.

It seems to me that, before recourse to the Guide, I had seen all the essential points of the Baird's Sparrow, though I did not note descriptions of the tail or legs. I did specifically notice the throat, which was white or very pale grey. The bird did not have a flat head, though I was not looking for that.

I shall record it as a Baird's Sparrow in my own life list, about which I am strictly honest. I might also point out that I identified fifty-five new species in Australia last fall -- all common enough to Australians but each of them a new challenge to me.

7. Description of voice: The bird uttered a phrase but, alas, I couldn't hear it.
8. Behavior: Sitting on a bush in almost full view, before looking at the Peterson Guide. The bird flew away as I was looking at the book.
9. Habitat - bushy area.
- specific; outside the Rose Garden on Wooded Island.
10. Similar species eliminated; Savannah Sparrow, no yellowish line above the eye. Henslow Sparrow: no flatish head.
11. Distance: about 30 feet, estimated.
12. Optics: Trinovid glasses.
13. Light: excellent.
14. Previous experience: see above, #6.
15. Other Observers: None
16. Books: Above. 15. Report written: notes, a few hours later.

John F. Wallace 13-116-77 Address: 5605 S. Dorchester Ave., Chicago, Ill
Date: 25 May 1989 60637

5605 S. Dorchester Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637

25 May 1989

Mr. Dale Pontius
5704 S. Harper Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Dear Dale,

I thought I should write to you about the Baird's Sparrow before I take off to England for a month. I'll be back briefly on June 30th and then in and out of Chicago all summer.

I saw the bird at 10:45 a.m. on Tuesday 23 May outside the Rose Garden on the Wooded Island at the S.E. corner facing the bridge into the park. I instantly recognized it as a sparrow that was new to me. I am no expert on sparrows but I have seen nine of them this spring, the light was excellent, the range perfect at about thirty feet, and my Trinovid glasses do all that can be expected of them.

The bird was so striking because of its immaculateness or trimness. Every line and color seemed clear and distinct. No wishy-washy colors; overall color greyish and I saw no brown on the wings. I should add that I had (I think) three good looks at the bird, which was sitting in a bush in almost full view, before I looked at the Peterson Guide. The bird flew away as I was looking at the book, so everything I saw so plainly was before I had the slightest idea of what the sparrow might be.

First, and most important, I saw the broad yellowish crown stripe, flanked by narrow dark or black stripes. My word was "yellowish" but Peterson's word, "Ochre" is perfect. I double-checked on this stripe as I knew it would be crucial, and confirmed both its width and its color. In one of my three "sightings" the whole side of the bird's head and upper breast was yellower than Peterson shows it. A very distinct yellowish tinge, you might say, to the front half of the bird. In my other sightings the yellow was still noticeable but less prominent and remarkable. I also saw the chain of streaks round the breast but did not pay them as much attention as I should have.

A point on which Peterson does not remark but which an observer familiar with the sparrow might comment: behind the eye, at what looked like a centimeter away (though it must have been half that) was a small dark spot or dot. This was distinct in its ochre-ish background and looked like a crucial field mark. Peterson shows the mark as triangular but does not call attention to it. He also shows on page 287 (Guide, 1980 edition) that the spot is preceded by a narrow triangular marking from the eye. In spite of the very clear light I did not notice this, and the spot appeared to be isolated on the side of the face.

One further observation. One feature of the bird's neatness was the distinctness of the white stripes on the back. Peterson shows them clearly enough but (in that light, again) they were brighter, fresher-looking, worth noting in the Guide.

It seems to me that, before recourse to the Guide, I had seen all the essential points of the Baird's Sparrow, though I did not note descriptions of the tail or legs. I did specifically notice the throat, which was white or very

pale grey. The bird did not have a flat head, though I was not looking for that. The bird uttered a phrase but, alas, I couldn't hear it!

I do not expect this observation to be accepted by the records' committee without confirmation from other bird-watchers; nor would I approve its acceptance, and am happy to have it recorded as "an unreliable sighting from the eighties." Nevertheless, I am not going back on what I saw, which was distinct and not in the least uncertain. I shall record it as a Baird's Sparrow in my own life list, about which I am strictly honest. I might also point out that I identified fifty-five new species in Australia last fall—all common enough to Australians but each of them a new challenge to me. I hope you may be able to forward a copy of this letter to the appropriate authorities.

Affectionately

John

John M. Wallace