

Yellow Grosbeak

1

Record Number: 90-42

2 Dec 1990

Classification: A-E

Elkhart, Polk Co., IA

D. Mosman, et al.

through 12/28; IBL 61:49,50,59, 62:22, Porter 1991

DOCUMENTATIONS

Jim Fuller, 2 Dec

Tim Schantz, 2 Dec

Ken Lowder, 2 Dec

Ann Johnson, 2 Dec

Thomas H. Kent, 5 Dec

Robert Cecil, 5 Dec

Ross Silcock, 6 Dec

Diane Porter, 8 Dec

Carl J. Bendorf, 26 Dec

PHOTOGRAPHS

Tim Schantz, P-0398

LETTERS

Leo Galloway, Dave Easterla, Jack Hilsobeck to Mrs. Mosmon, 29 Dec 1990

Stephen F. Bailey to Tim Schantz, 9-23 Jan 1991

Tim Schantz to Iowa Records Committee, 12 Feb 1991

Tim Schantz to Iowa Records Committee [undated, includes 9 internet computer printouts from Jim Fuller]

Kenn Kaufman to Carl J. Bendorf, 16 Jul 1991

Gary H. Rosenberg to Carl J. Bendorf, 21 Sep 1991

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:49, 50, 59

Records Committee: IBL 62:22

Porter, D. 1991. Yellow Grosbeak in Iowa. Bird Watcher's Digest 13:16 [includes photo by Tim Schantz].

Stone, L. ? Rare Latin bird drawing crowds to Elkhart yard. The Des Moines Register. [includes Tim Schanz photo]

VOTE: 1 A-P, 1 A-D, 5 A-E

A-P: Tough! I will probably be in the minority on this one but I believe, contrary to outside opinion, that I can accept this bird and will proceed to explain. I do not think we need to spend more time on deciding it is indeed a Yellow Grosbeak.

Late November carried strong upper level Southwest winds over Western United States (U.S. Weather Bureau T H Kent). Early Dec saw dying winds over Central and upper U.S.

A Yellow Grosbeak appear as well as the documented Hepatic-Summer (Cooperi) Tanager. Coincidence? Doubtful. Yellow Grosbeaks are nearly unknown as a vagrant but so are Painted Redstarts as far away as New York. Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher in Ontario Canada all appear within a short time of each other. Coincidence?

Doubtful. Escapees? Doubtful. In past years, after the first migrants arrived others appeared. When populations of birds are diminishing often there is wide spread dispersal of individuals.

As for the birds plumage, it could not have been more perfect.

Not a feather out of place, no broken shafts, no feather ends worn or broken, certainly not a caged bird that had just arrived.

if indeed this was caged bird when it arrived, it certainly under-took a complete and successful molt. This Grosbeak was viewed by many with all aspects of Scopes, Cameras and binoculars; many at very close range while the bird was feeding. Not a single person noted the birds feet as being deformed or covered with foot fungus, a very common malady of caged birds. Coincidence? Doubtful. Over the period of the next few weeks this bird survived 2-not one zero degree snow storms, hardly a task for a caged bird. This grosbeak even located nearly identical habitat to its own home environment (thick brushy rugged terrain) a task unlikely a caged bird would have succeeded in. As for escapees, we are not even close to an Import house. We do indeed have a substantial population of Hispanics as well as Orientals but I have yet to hear of a single Asian escape species in Iowa. We as members of the records committee cannot treat all out of territory birds as escapees, contrary to late published materials. I do think waterfowl and falconer's (all birds of prey) birds need to be closely evaluated. To me, the midwest does not as yet have a pattern of escaped cage birds. If we fail to accept this excellent record, we haven't voted our deep convictions or we didn't do all our home work.

A-E: It's not clear to me that this bird was, with absolute certainty, a Yellow Grosbeak. According to Kenn Kaufman (pers. comm.), the Yellow Grosbeak is "best considered to be a complex of different forms -- at least five fully isolated populations, comprising anything from one to four species, or perhaps more, depending who you ask. Even if we lump all the forms into one species, it's still impossible to say anything meaningful about this bird's origins unless we know which population it represents...certainly it's not safe to just assume it came from Mexico". This same general assessment was made by (or perhaps was prompted by Kaufman) Peterjohn in AMERICAN BIRDS (vol 45:2 p. 281). The problem of population origin was addressed in Schantz' correspondence with Steve Bailey but this was a little confusing. At one point, Bailey's letter suggests that the bird may have been a South American population but a follow up phone call suggests this could have been due to slide color. Perhaps the bird was from a Mexican population but this is not definite. Since we can't eliminate doubt about the bird's origin by plumage, it really comes down to opinion or belief or a gut reaction, if you will, about the bird's chances as a vagrant. I know very little about Yellow Grosbeaks but how about those who do? There is a split in opinion among those who may know something about this species. A note from Leo Galloway of Missouri to the Mosman's suggests that Dave Easterla thinks it wasn't a caged bird. Paul DeBendictis of New York says a captive origin shouldn't be ruled out until the Iowa Records Committee can investigate (this is a sort of backhanded endorsement). Kenn Kaufman and Steve Bailey don't really commit on the question of origin. Finally, the following appear to have serious doubt about natural vagrancy: Bruce Peterjohn, Gary Rosenberg (pers. comm.), John Saba, Gale Monson, and, according to Saba, "everyone [on the Arizona Records Committee] agreed that it would be HIGHLY

UNLIKELY for the bird to have arrived unassisted". In view of all the above, the conclusion that this was possibly an unnatural occurrence is not just a "knee-jerk" reaction. It's a very real and definite possibility.

A-E: There appears to be no doubt regarding the identification of this species--which leaves the more puzzling question of origin. The most accurate answer to this question is probably we don't know and will never know for sure. There are convincing arguments to both sides of the question. On the side of a natural occurrence, the bird was a first year male with unfrayed plumage. It fed on natural food and was reportedly wary. If it had begun a migration in the absolute wrong direction, it may have continued until it reached Iowa. On the opposite side, it does not fit the pattern of vagrancy (if the few records in Arizona can be called a pattern) for this species. One of the most interesting aspects is the fact that a bird dealer commented in a letter to Tim Schantz that this species just LAST YEAR became illegal to hold in captivity. The bird apparently did not escape from a known zoo population but could a dealer have released a bird upon realizing it was no longer legal to sell? John Saba also mentions that the unfrayed plumage could be explained by the bird recently completing a molt.

At this time I think it is best to take the conservative approach.

A-E: First, a big thanks to Tim Schantz and Jim Fuller for their efforts to find out more about the identification and origin of this bird. They utilized sources I didn't even know existed. Assuming that the bird was correctly identified (the only one who seemed to question this was Peterjohn in AMERICAN BIRDS.), the question is one of origin. On the "wild" side, the bird was in immaculate plumage, it was unbanded, it was relatively wary of humans, and it had no other signs of captivity such as (I have been told) wear of claws or feet. On the escapee side of the argument, these are evidently kept as cage birds in Mexico, Iowa is hosting a fairly significant influx of Hispanics, and the bird was found near a major N-S interstate. In evaluating this record, precedent must also be considered. While there is a first time for everything, the total absence of any vagrancy pattern must be considered. As everyone knows by now, this bird only rarely shows up in the S.W. U.S., along the Mexican border, usually in Spring and Summer. This hardly constitutes a case for an appearance in Iowa in Mid-winter. Until such a vagrancy pattern can be established (and I doubt that it ever will), this record should be A-E.

A-P: The description and photos seem to eliminate all other species I am familiar with except a first winter Black-headed Grosbeak. The definitely yellow eyeline and streaked olive rump, per Ann Johnson, seem to eliminate a first year Black-headed Grosbeak. The origin of this bird is suspect. The work Tim Schantz and Jim Fuller did indicate this bird is extremely unlikely as an escape and/or as a vagrant. The pictures show a bird in good clean plumage, and because no one contacted seems to think this bird is kept in captivity in the U.S. I must vote

vagrant and accept the record.

A-E: A very interesting record. I do not think there is much doubt as to whether this was a Yellow Grosbeak or not. The photos clearly eliminate any other species. The huge dark bill, body coloration, white spots (and their placement) on a black wing describes this species in an immature plumage and goes a long with the descriptions on the various documentations. There is a slight possibility that this is a wild bird but the most likely possibility is that this bird was assisted to its Iowa location in some way or another. I will not attempt to conjecture as to how, why, when, etc. this took place. I do agree that fresh plumage would be expected at this time of year since a fall seasonal molt would have just taken place in the recent past. this bird could have been at this location or in the vicinity of this location for some time before it was "noticed" and seen by so many, giving it reason to be in fresh plumage near Elkhart, Iowa. The probability that this is not an escapee or released bird is extremely remote given everything I have read (what material there is to be found) about this species. This is far from beyond reasonable doubt as far as I am concerned. it is too bad we did not hear from some of the other experts on this record, i.e., Rosenberg, Kaufman, Bowers, Van Remsen. Something from them might have helped me evaluate this record differently. For now I will have to evaluate this record as A-E.

A-E: The very detailed documentations of many excellent birders and Tim Schantz' excellent slides all show this to be a Yellow Grosbeak. The main question is how this intriguing bird came to Iowa. While I feel it is remotely possible for a disoriented bird to fly here from Mexico, the possibilities are very slim. As of now, I can't believe beyond a reasonable doubt that this bird flew to Iowa in November from Mexico unassisted and must view this bird as a possible escapee.



Departments of Ornithology and Mammalogy

9-23 January 1991

Tim Schantz
309 E Robinson St.
Knoxville, IA 50138

Dear Tim,

My own experience and knowledge of Yellow Grosbeaks is very limited. I have only seen them in Ecuador, ten years ago. Our collection here at CAS is also limited. We have only 12 study skins: 3 from Sinaloa, 8 from Guerrero, and one from captivity (but Mexican caught).

Luckily, yesterday (8 January) we were visited by Steve Howell, Sophie Webb, and David Sibley. I asked them about your problem. Steve and his manuscript field guide were helpful.

My preliminary expectation was that adult male Yellow Grosbeaks have a winter plumage that superimposes dark streaks onto the yellow head. However, Steve and his manuscript disagreed, indicating that adult males should have a really yellow head all year.

In any case, we all agreed with you that this seems to have been a male. No female should have wings that black, white primary bases so extensive, or yellow so deep and with so limited streaking.

Steve said that he thought this bird was in first basic plumage. This was based on the dark head markings. I cannot contradict this, but I am not totally convinced.

By the way, juvenal plumage doesn't look remotely like this, so this should never be called a "juvenile" or "juvenal".

Based on their tags, we have 8 males and 4 females in the CAS collection. None looks like the bird you photographed. All 4 of the females and 6 of the 8 males have brown wings and tails, but most are heavily worn. Only two males have black wings and tails, and both have the larger white spots of the "adult male". None of our specimens is from the winter, and both black-winged males have yellow heads. Not much help.

As to what taxon this bird represented, the answer is not clear. Obviously this is not a Black-thighed Grosbeak, which lacks the white marks in the wings and tail. However, Yellow Grosbeaks from northern South America look very similar to Mexican birds. Steve and Sophie thought that your bird was more orange than Mexican birds but less orange than Guatemalan birds. Then they checked the illustrations in the new Birds of the High

90-42

Andes by Fjeldsa and Krabbe (1990). "Interpolating between the adult male and the female" from Fjeldsa's color plate, Steve said that it looked like it could be right for an immature male South American Yellow Grosbeak. Repeating this myself, your bird looks more orange than even Fjeldsa's adult male.

I am now resuming this letter on 23 January 1991.

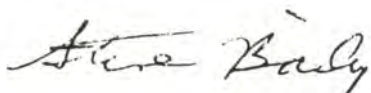
Summarizing to this point: Your bird apparently was a male. Steve Howell thought it was in first basic plumage. I don't know enough to say yes or no. Steve thought your bird's orange tones might better fit Yellow Grosbeaks from northern South America than those from Mexico. All I will say is that it may have been too orange for a bird of that age/sex category from the nearest populations in Mexico. This could be used as an argument against the likelihood that it was a natural vagrant, but I would not want to be considered enough of an authority on which to "sink" this record. My own feeling is that it is possible that it got to Iowa on its own, but that it is perhaps more likely that it had been in captivity. However, this is just a feeling, based on very little. If you can find more knowledgeable experts on this bird then you should give their opinions more weight than mine.

I hope this helps. Feel free to include this letter with any submission to your records committee.

As you sent me a duplicate slide, I am assuming that you did not expect it returned. Please tell me soon if you need it back, and I will return it promptly. Otherwise I will hold on to it for reference, especially in case you or anyone else should follow up on my opinions.

One last point is that we were uncertain as to the date of your observation. Depending on which convention you use, "12/2/90" could mean either 12 February 1990 or December 2, 1990. We are guessing that you meant the latter, because you indicated that the record was recent. In museum science, and many other branches of science, such ambiguous coding of dates is not acceptable. Months are always given in word form (even if abbreviated), except that some Europeans use Roman numerals to indicate months. The latter usage is unambiguous and is more universal across different languages, but it slows down most readers. Even the "90" portion of the date code will eventually become ambiguous; most of our specimens dated "90" are from 1890. Obviously the photo dates from 1990, but the general principle remains the same: ambiguously coded dates frequently mean lost data at a later time. I recommend that you (and everyone else who wants to be understood by others) cease using the XX/XX/XX coding of dates immediately.

Sincerely,



Stephen F. Bailey
Collections Manager

1. See added sheet

To: Iowa Records Committee (IOU)

From: Tim Schantz, 309 E Robinson St., Knoxville IA, 50138

Date: 12 February 1991

Correspondences with Steve Bailey and Sophie Webb. After receiving the letter from Steve Bailey I called him having noticed that the duplicate slide I had provided him showed much brighter orange tones than the originals or the bird in the field (duplicate and originals should be compared) Taking that into consideration Dr. Stephen Bailey said, "the fact that this is a South American Yellow Grosbeak was based strictly on the amount of orange that the duplicate slide shows." The Records Committee should notice that the originals are much lighter. This would indicate that The bird is not a South American Yellow Grosbeak. Dr. Stephen Bailey has been provided with originals since this time.

I also talked with Sophie Webb who is illustrating the upcoming Field Guide to The Birds of Mexico by Steve Howell. She said, "Steve's decision was based on the amount of orange shown in the duplicate slide" (Steve was in Belize).

To: Iowa Records Committee (IOU)

From: Tim Schantz, 309 E Robinson St., Knoxville IA, 50138

The following are dated correspondences that were provided by Jim Fuller in reference to the Iowa Yellow Grosbeak.

[22] From: chuckw%evax2@arizona.edu at internet 12/4/90 10:42PM (2590 bytes: 52 ln)

To: jfuller at dentistry-po, BENEDICT@SNYSYRV1.BITNET at internet

Subject: Re: YELLOW GROSBEEK

----- Message Contents -----

Message-Id: <41C6D33F2CA0021A@Arizona.edu>

X-Envelope-To: JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu

X-Vms-To: TELCOM::IN%"JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu"

X-Vms-Cc: UACCIT::SABA,@PAULB

Hi Jim, Sharon (my warm field guide) responds after the quote... -cw-

JF> We have a yellow grosbeak in Iowa that has been coming
 JF> to a feeder in the central part of the state. It was
 JF> originally reported as a pine grosbeak, so I went to see it
 JF> on Sunday. However, it was an immature male yellow grosbeak.
 JF> Of course, this sighting is so preposterous that the records
 JF> committee will have a difficult time with its origin. The
 JF> logical thing is to consider it an escapee. But, since this
 JF> bird is in excellent plumage...not like an escaped caged
 JF> bird, and since it is a young bird it could be for real.
 JF> My question to you is do you know anybody in your part of
 JF> the country that I could talk to about vagrancy patterns,
 JF> extralimital records, whether it is kept as a caged bird or
 JF> is sold in pet stores, etc., etc. Thanks.
 JF>
 JF> Jim Fuller, Iowa City"

Dear Jim:

In answer to your questions about Yellow Grosbeaks: (although I don't claim to be an expert on Yellow Grosbeak dispersal & vagrancy), to my knowledge, there are just a handful of records from southern Arizona during late summer. The species is definitely not a high elevation or cold weather species, and has not strayed nearly so far from Mexico before. Several years ago we did have a report from Tucson in November, but it was never verified.

I would not expect the bird to show up in other times or places, though stranger things have happened and young birds do sometimes appear well out of range. Given the fact that many colorful birds are kept as cage birds in Mexico, most "authorities" will be suspicious of the origin of something like this. I have personally seen such things as Painted Buntings just across the border, and would not be surprised to see a Yellow Grosbeak in a cage.

I can pass on your sighting to a few other people here who may feel more able to comment on it- but please post a complete description of the bird, so that others will be able to evaluate the sighting more accurately.

Wish I could be of more help-

Sharon G.

[31] From: <benedict%snysyrv1.bitnet@cornellc.cit.cornell.edu> at bitnet 12/7/90 4:05PM (1483 bytes: 25 ln)
To: jfuller at dentistry-po
Subject: About that grosbeak...

----- Message Contents -----
X-Original-To: JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu, BENEDICT

The ABA Checklist committee follows the decision of the Iowa state committee on records like this. Kenn Kaufmann would be a good contact for evaluation, as would Dr. J. Van Remsen at the LSU Museum of Zoology.

There is now considerable precedent of southwestern species turning up far north and east of their range in the fall (the most spectacular I saw as a Painted Redstart in NY), so don't rule out a captive origin until your state committee has a chance to investigate. In the meantime, make sure good documentation has been obtained and submitted to the Iowa Bird Records Comm, and the best photos should be placed on file with V.I.R.E.O. at the Academy of Nat. Sciences in Philadelphia.

Most of the mailing addresses you need are in Amer. Birds or in Birding (I don't happen to have them handy).

In the meanwhile, enjoy the bird.

Paul DeBenedictis, Chair, ABA Checklist Committee
(Manager, Academic Computing, SUNY Health Sci. Ctr at Syracuse)

PS. - I can't figure out how to get the editor to work with this mail package. the third word in paragraph 2 should read NOW. and don't rule out a NATURAL origin

[36] From: john saba - ua ccit user support <saba@ccit.arizona.edu> at internet
12/8/90 5:50PM (1087 bytes: 22 ln)
To: jfuller at dentistry-po
Subject: yellow grosbeak

----- Message Contents -----
Message-id: <F1C2608CC55F400D72@ccit.arizona.edu>
X-Envelope-to: jfuller@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu
X-VMS-To: IN%"<jfuller@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu>"
X-VMS-Cc: SABA

Hi Jim,

Chuck Williamson says you'd like to hear people's opinions on
the Yellow Grosbeak coming to a feeder in Iowa.

We discussed this briefly last night at the Arizona Field Ornithologists
meeting. Everyone agreed that it would be HIGHLY UNLIKELY for the bird to
have arrived unassisted. Almost all AZ records are in June. In Mexico,
these birds move south in the fall. *Gale Monson said you probably couldn't
find a Yellow Grosbeak in Mexico north of Alamos around this time of year.

Hope this helps.

Say hi to Tim Shantz next time you see him (if he hasn't already
moved on).

John Saba

* indicating that this species makes a significant seasonal movement? T.S.

[26] From: john saba - ua ccit user support <saba@ccit.arizona.edu> at internet
12/10/90 9:41AM (1097 bytes: 21 ln)
To: jfuller at dentistry-po
Subject: Re: yellow grosbeak

----- Message Contents -----
Message-id: <F0746A2B2FBF402B8A@ccit.arizona.edu>
X-Envelope-to: JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu
X-VMS-To: IN%"JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu"
X-VMS-Cc: SABA

Jim,

If the Yellow Grosbeak is still coming around, Gale Monson suggests trying to mist net it. That way, it can be examined and photographed more carefully.

As to the bird being in fresh plumage, that would be expected, as the fall molt would just have taken place.

A few years ago, we had a Double-striped Thick-knee on a golf course in Yuma. Lots of people, local as well as from out of state, showed up to see it. It turns out the bird was transported there from Guatemala, and released when the owner found out it was illegal to keep. Until this bit of news, lots of people were "counting" it.

John

[3] From: <benedict%snysyrv1.bitnet@cornellc.cit.cornell.edu> at bitnet 12/7/90 4:05PM (1483 bytes: 25 ln)

To: jfuller at dentistry-po

Subject: About that grosbeak...

9042

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[5] From: chuckw%evax2@arizona.edu at internet 12/7/90 10:00AM (820 bytes: 18 ln)

To: jfuller at dentistry-po

Subject: Re: YELLOW GROSBEAK

90-42

----- Message Contents -----

Message-id: <32CA6798A2007F9A@Arizona.edu>

X-Envelope-to: JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu

X-VMS-To: TELCOM::IN%"JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu"

X-VMS-Cc: MAX::CWILLIAMSON

Jim: Gary Rosenberg comes to mind on one contact... not to mention Ken Kaufman (who is in Africa for a bit more)... and also Rick Bowers (who owes me one).

I might have to wait until tonight to send you IOWA from on my BBS (if I've deleted it from here)...

By the way, seems as if there is a technical problem with messages coming out of ARIZVM1... bear with us!

-CW-

[2] From: john saba - ua ccit user support <saba@ccit.arizona.edu> at internet 1
2/8/90 5:50PM (1087 bytes: 22 ln)
To: jfuller at dentistry-po
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90.42

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[22] From: chuckw%evax2@arizona.edu at internet 12/17/90 3:50PM (704 bytes: 22 1
n)
To: jfuller at dentistry-po
Subject: Re: YELLOW GROSBEAK

----- Message Contents -----
Message-Id: <EAC0BB2ED08340972C@Arizona.edu>
X-Envelope-To: JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu
X-Vms-To: TELCOM::IN%"JFULLER@dentistry-po.dentistry.uiowa.edu"

Gary Rosenberg said he would be happy to review
your YELLOW GROSBECK record.

Short of Ken Kaufmann, you couldn't ask for a
more knowledgeable authority.

Send the 'stuff' to him:

Gary Rosenberg
5441 North Swan Rd, No. 313
Tucson Az 85718

His phone is 602 299-6478

-CW-

Bird Watchers Digest Vol 13, No 4
March/April 1991

QUICK TAKES FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

PAT MURPHY



Iowa's yellow grosbeak.

YELLOW GROSBEAK IN IOWA

An immature male yellow grosbeak showed up at a feeder in Elkhart, Iowa, near Des Moines, on November 24, 1990. It survived one of Iowa's heaviest snowstorms in years and for more than a month was seen around the neighborhood where it was originally spotted, as well as in a brushy ravine. Hosting the bird at their feeder were Dean and Dianne Mosman.

The yellow grosbeak is native to western Mexico and Guatemala, and the species has been a casual vagrant to southeast Arizona in the summer. There are no accepted records in other states. The question is whether this bird got to Iowa on its own, or whether it is an escape. There are four known yellow grosbeaks in U.S. zoos; none is missing. The bird at the Elkhart feeder has plumage in good condition, showing no sign of cage wear or damage.

If the Iowa Records Committee decides that the bird is a wild, free bird, this will go down as a most remarkable sighting. At press time, early in 1991, the bird was still being seen at the Mosmans' feeder. The yellow gros-

beak is pictured in both the National Geographic guide and in the Peterson western guide. (Prepared by Diane Porter, member of the Iowa Ornithologists' board of directors.)

TIM SCHANTZ

CAVE CREEK CANYON THREAT AVERTED

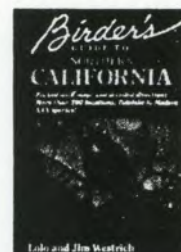
As the result of efforts by a concerned citizens' committee, plans have been suspended to explore the feasibility of an open-pit gold mine operation (using a cyanide-leach process) in the Chiricahua Mountains of southeast Arizona one-half mile from the community of Portal and Cave Creek Canyon. The Newmont Mining Company, 1700 Lincoln Street, Denver, Colorado 80203, responding to citizen protest, has announced it will not pursue the project for at least a year, giving opponents time to work for more permanent protection of one of the most pristine natural areas in the United States. The committee is fearful that mining operations will be accompanied by attendant ground and surface water pollution, as well as by air pollution, with catastrophic effect on wildlife. Also participating in the effort to protect the Cave Creek area are local chapters of the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society.

Efforts are now being made to have the U.S. Forest Service withdraw permits to mine these national forest lands. Newmont's application is based upon the old 1872 Mining Law, which permits the staking of claims on federal lands, the taking of minerals without payment and without environmental safeguards, and the subsequent taking of title for \$2.50 to \$5.00 an acre. (Last year the federal government sold about

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QUICK TAKES FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

PAT MURPHY



Iowa's yellow grosbeak.

YELLOW GROSBEAK IN IOWA

An immature male yellow grosbeak showed up at a feeder in Elkhart, Iowa, near Des Moines, on November 24, 1990. It survived one of Iowa's heaviest snowstorms in years and for more than a month was seen around the neighborhood where it was originally spotted, as well as in a brushy ravine. Hosting the bird at their feeder were Dean and Dianne Mosman.

The yellow grosbeak is native to western Mexico and Guatemala, and the species has been a casual vagrant to southeast Arizona in the summer. There are no accepted records in other states. The question is whether this bird got to Iowa on its own, or whether it is an escape. There are four known yellow grosbeaks in U.S. zoos; none is missing. The bird at the Elkhart feeder has plumage in good condition, showing no sign of cage wear or damage.

If the Iowa Records Committee decides that the bird is a wild, free bird, this will go down as a most remarkable sighting. At press time, early in 1991, the bird was still being seen at the Mosmans' feeder. The yellow gros-

beak is pictured in both the National Geographic guide and in the Peterson western guide. *(Prepared by Diane Porter, member of the Iowa Ornithologists' board of directors.)*

TIM SCHANTZ

CAVE CREEK CANYON THREAT AVERTED

As the result of efforts by a concerned citizens' committee, plans have been suspended to explore the feasibility of an open-pit gold mine operation (using a cyanide-leach process) in the Chiricahua Mountains of southeast Arizona one-half mile from the community of Portal and Cave Creek Canyon. The Newmont Mining Company, 1700 Lincoln Street, Denver, Colorado 80203, responding to citizen protest, has announced it will not pursue the project for at least a year, giving opponents time to work for more permanent protection of one of the most pristine natural areas in the United States. The committee is fearful that mining operations will be accompanied by attendant ground and surface water pollution, as well as by air pollution, with catastrophic effect on wildlife. Also participating in the effort to protect the Cave Creek area are local chapters of the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society.

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Rare Latin bird drawing crowds to Elkhart yard

By LARRY STONE

Register Staff Writer

ELKHART, IA. — A yellowish bird with a large beak has confounded Midwest bird-watchers.

The yellow grosbeak, a native of western Mexico and Central America, has been seen periodically in Dean and Diane Mosman's back yard in Elkhart since Nov. 24. Their son, Mike, first spotted the unusual creature eating cracked corn from a feeder.

When the Mosmans couldn't identify the bird, they called other bird-watchers and the "Iowa Birdline," a telephone recording operated by the Iowa Ornithologists' Union.

Tim Schantz, naturalist for the Marion County Conservation Board, was the first to recognize the bird as an immature male yellow grosbeak, a species he'd seen in Mexico.

Schantz checked with zoos and found no reports of yellow grosbeaks having escaped. Only four are in captivity in North America, according to computerized zoo inventories.

In the past two weeks, scores of people from Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, Missouri and Illinois have tromped through the Mosmans' yard for a glimpse of the grosbeak.

Sandy Komito of Fairlawn, N.J., flew to Iowa just to see the grosbeak. He holds the record for the most species of birds seen in North America in one year: 724 species in 1987.

Komito and others heard of the grosbeak from the North American Rare Bird Alert service, which notifies people of unusual bird sightings.

The Mosmans said most of the bird-watchers have been congenial, although the couple didn't count on baby-sitting the two small children and a dog that accompanied a Minnesota couple.

The Mosmans request no more visitors until after Jan. 1. They promised to call the Iowa Birdline then to report if the grosbeak is still visiting their feeder.

The Iowa Birdline number is (319) 338-9881.

TIM SCHANTZ/Special to The Register



Iowa rarity

This yellow grosbeak, a rarity in Iowa, is turning bird-watchers in Elkhart all atwitter. STORY: 1M.

September 21, 1991

Carl J. Bendorf
845 Cypress Ct.
Iowa City, IA 52245

Dear Carl:

I'm sorry for the long delay in getting this information back to you -- such is the life of a bird tour leader. Let me start first with the easy one.

Concerning the identification of the tanager seen on Dec. 2 1990, the photos clearly represent a Summer Tanager and not a Hepatic. I have never seen a Hepatic that shows the overall orangish-yellow color that is clearly depicted in the photos. This is entirely typical of young males or females of Summers. Hepatic males are entirely "brick" red, not orange-yellow. Female Hepatics are very yellow on the throat region fading to dull yellow on the rest of the underparts. Furthermore, there is no indication on the photos, or in the description, that the bird had dusky cheeks. In fact, the photos suggest the opposite -- the thin eyeringed appearance with the uniform cheek is typical of Summer. The bill as depicted in the photos is not typical of a Hepatic either. There is quite a bit of brown on the maxilla but the mandible appears fairly pale. I'm not sure what this suggests, whether it is a young bird (probably), or something else, such as diet etc. (many out of place, or out of season birds tend to show some sort of defect), but the bill looks large and the wrong for Hepatic. Typical Hepatics have very gray bills without areas of pale on the mandible. In the description, the observer describes the bill as gray on the mandible, but the photos suggest otherwise. Regardless, there is nothing about the photos that suggest Hepatic over Summer so I am inclined to go with Summer for the I.D. I went ahead and showed the photos to Will Russell, and David Stejskal, both members of the Arizona Bird Committee, and they both said obviously Summer.

Now for the difficult one. There is no doubt that the identification of the Yellow Grosbeak is correct. I have read through the information that you sent along with the slides and have a few comments.

I can't really comment too much on the identification to subspecies. I suggest if you continue to find this of importance that you send the photos to Van Remsen or Steve Cardiff at L.S.U so that they compare them directly to specimens. Ultimately, I don't think this would have much bearing on my decision as to the likelihood of natural occurrence. If the bird turns out to

be of the northern population one could argue both ways. Perhaps it is more likely an escaped cagebird as it is more likely that a bird from the northern population would be captured and transported to the U.S. If the bird turns out to be one from South America I'm not sure what that would prove. Most subspecies are at least somewhat migratory. Without direct comparison to specimens, not much can be said. Photos are often a bit misleading as to exact tone of color, so the entire exercise may turn out to be futile.

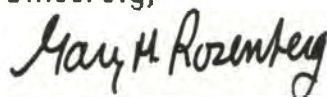
The main question is whether the bird is an escape or not. In my opinion this is basically an unanswerable question. There will never be a 100 % definite answer. So how do we handle records such as these. In Arizona we have to handle many records of dubious origin, and there are several different approaches. My approach is that not all records have to be put in one of two categories; wild and naturally occurring, or escaped. In my opinion there is a third category, a so-called gray list, that birds should be placed on when there simply is not enough data to go on. I feel that to be included in the scientific record, we must be as certain as possible that the record represents a naturally occurring individual. To do this we use precedence and whether or not the record fits into a known pattern. Does the bird in question migrate? Is it a likely vagrant at that particular season? Are there previous records of the species away from areas of known occurrence during that season? etc. etc... Most vagrants can be evaluated using this approach. For example, the Summer Tanager record discussed above. There are many southern U.S. winter records of Summer Tanagers, and this simply fits into a known pattern of occurrence. But how do you evaluate a first North American record such as the Swallow-tailed Gull record from coastal California. In my opinion, this record can not be accepted onto our normal lists as there is absolutely no precedence for that species to occur in the northern Hemisphere north of the Galapagos Islands. This record should be placed onto an hypothetical list until more records occur that establish some sort of pattern, then that record can be re-evaluated. Of course there are many records that are more difficult to evaluate. How many records are needed to establish a pattern? I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions, but I would prefer to see the scientific record as clean as possible, therefore I tend to be very conservative in my evaluation of records. Some say that if there is a greater than 50/50 chance of it being wild, then it should be accepted. My acceptance level is closer to 95 %.

Anyway, How does the Yellow Grosbeak record fit into all of this. One, there are no records for this species for winter in North America; almost all the records are from late spring/early summer. Furthermore, there is no established pattern of this species moving northward in winter in other

areas within its range, such as in Mexico, the area most likely the source of any vagrant found in the U.S. This species is a common cage bird in Mexico, and although no visible damage to the bird is evident in the photos or descriptions, the possibility of being held for some time in a cage can not be ruled out. The fact that it took up residence for such a long time at a particular feeder is not consistent with the records from Arizona, most of which were out in the wild. The ones that did turn up at feeders have been accepted, but may indeed have been escapees. Who knows. Therefore, in my opinion, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the Yellow Grosbeak in Iowa was a naturally occurring vagrant, and at the very least should be put on an hypothetical list for the state until either further records occur, or some sort of pattern is established elsewhere within its range. If no such list occurs (as in California and Arizona), then in my opinion the record should be rejected as to be conservative in what we accept onto the scientific record. Whether or not the record is accepted onto the Iowa state list does not change the fact that a Yellow Grosbeak was there and that people enjoyed it. That people with large egos will undoubtedly be upset if the record is not accepted, and they will be unable to count the bird on their Iowa (or North America) list is unfortunate, but it comes with being on a state committee. I myself am more concerned with the accuracy of the scientific record than I am with either my list or anyone elses.

I hope you find this a bit useful in your evaluation of the record. Not everyone shares this approach, but... I took it from your letter that I could keep the photos for my files. If you would like them back, just let me know.

Sincerely,



Gary H. Rosenberg

90-42

7934 Sabino Sunrise Circle
Tucson, Arizona 85715
16 July 1991

Carl J. Bendorf
845 Cypress Court
Iowa City, IA 52245

Dear Carl:

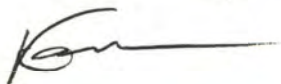
Thanks for your note. I had heard a little about the grosbeak in Iowa last November, and naturally was intrigued about the report.

Although I'm not unwilling to look at the documentation, I don't think that my reactions would be particularly helpful. Here's my reasoning. The bird may have been an obvious Yellow Grosbeak, but it's not obvious just what that means. Yellow Grosbeak is best considered to be a complex of different forms -- at least five fully isolated populations, comprising anything from one to four species, or perhaps more, depending who you ask. Even if we lump all the forms into one species, it's still impossible to say anything meaningful about this bird's origins unless we know which population it represents... certainly it's not safe to just assume it came from Mexico.

Separating the various forms in the complex, especially females / immatures, is a tough assignment. It definitely can't be done by reference to any combination of field guides. The only realistic approach would be to take the photos and field descriptions, and compare them carefully to good museum series. I enjoy doing that kind of thing, but I don't expect to be visit a large enough collection anytime in the next few months. The only collections in North America that would probably have specimens of all the relevant forms would be the American Museum in New York, the U.S. National Museum in Washington, the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, and Louisiana State University. Your best bet would be to contact Mark Robbins at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th and The Parkway, Philadelphia, PA 19103; or Dr. J. V. Remsen at the Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University, Foster Hall 119, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.

Hope these comments are of some help. Good luck getting this worked out... a fascinating record, whatever its origins.

Sincerely,



Kenn Kaufman

DOCUMENTATION FOR RARE BIRD

SPECIES: Yellow Grosbeak

LOCATION: Backyard of Dean and Diane Mosman; Two and a half miles southeast of Elkhart (Polk County Iowa)

HABITAT: Backyard and adjacent wooded ravine.

WHEN: 2 December, 1990 10:30AM to 11:20AM

WHO: Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll, RR#6, Iowa City, Iowa, 52240

OTHERS PRESENT: D & D Mosman; E & E Armstrong; D & C Thompson; T & T Schantz; J Scheib; K. Lowder; J Daniel.

OTHERS BEFORE OR AFTER: Mob

COMMENTS and DESCRIPTION: Dean Mosman of Elkhart reported and documented a pine grosbeak which had been in his backyard and at his feeder (eating cracked corn) since November 24th. It was first seen by his son, Mike Mosman. Along with Jim Scheib, I arrived at the Mosman residence on Sunday, December 2nd at about 8:20AM. Dean described the bird he had been seeing as "mustard yellow". Soon after, a number of other birders arrived. About 9:45AM, a neighbor, Wilbur Hutchins, phoned saying he had the bird at his feeder. When we all arrived at his home 0.2 miles north of the Mosman's, Mr. Hutchins came out and said the bird had flown as we were driving in the driveway. After watching the Mosman feeder a while longer, Jim Scheib and I volunteered to go into the brushy ravine adjacent to the Mosman yard to search for the bird. We very soon located a yellow green bird sitting only about 3-4 feet off the ground. It was immediately apparent that this was not a pine grosbeak. In fact, the brief look suggested the scarlet tanager that I had in my yard just three weeks earlier. Before further searching, we called the rest of the group. We soon relocated the bird, and watched it for the better part of the next hour. It usually was found low to the ground, or on the ground, sometimes hiding in brush. When Tim Schantz first got a good look at the bird, he exclaimed that it looked like a yellow grosbeak, a bird he had photographed in Mexico just a few weeks previously.

The following description was written from notes made at the time of observation. No field guide was seen until after notes had been completed.

GENERAL APPEARANCE: The bird was generally a little smaller than a robin, but pretty much the same shape. The overall color was yellow-green to yellow.

HEAD: The crown was rounded with the highest point above the eye. The crown color was a greenish-yellow and finely streaked. There

was a darker grayish-green and somewhat triangular shaped face patch, and a yellow line above the eye. The eye was dark.

BILL: The bill was massive (although not quite as large as is depicted in the National Geographic field guide). The upper mandible was a unique blue-black color, and it looked glossy. The lower mandible was less shiny, and more gray. The closed bill was thick at the base, but narrowed in a short distance to the tip. There was no overlap of the two mandibles, and no hook at the tip. The border of the upper mandible was slightly convex.

THROAT, BREAST, BELLY: All were a warm lemon yellow color which was uniform, except for subtle red wash over the upper breast.

VENT: The vent was a uniform white color, and unstreaked.

BACK: The back was a khaki green color with bold black streaking which ran up and down.

RUMP: The rump was a yellow-green color.

TAIL: The tail was slightly forked. It was a grayish-green color with no unusual markings.

LEGS: Legs were a dark color, and there were no bands present.

WINGS: The folded wings were grayish. There were 3 patches of white, which seemed to change shape slightly each time I saw the bird. The most anterior of the white areas was usually wider in the horizontal dimension. The other two areas were more posterior, and one was above the other. The bottom one was usually fairly square, while the upper area was irregular, but wider in the vertical dimension. There was also a line of white spots at the tip of the secondaries. In flight, no unusual markings were noted.

VOICE: I did not hear any vocalizations.

BEHAVIOR: The bird was usually in low locations, even on the ground. I watched it apparently feeding on the ground for about five minutes at one point. It was picking up something and eating it. It often disappeared in heavy brush, making it not visible for periods of time. It seemed to be quite wary.

PLUMAGE: The feathering appeared to be fresh. I could detect no feathers that appeared greatly worn.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Pine grosbeak is not lemon yellow in any plumage, and has a smaller bill with hooked upper mandible. Evening grosbeak has black wings and tail and light colored bill in all plumages

VIEWING CONDITIONS: Overcast day. Seen in late morning at 25-75 feet with Swift Audubon (8.5 X 44) binoculars.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE with SPECIES: None

REFERENCES CONSULTED: National Geographic Soc field guide was consulted after field notes had been made. The field notes were made immediately, and a documentation form was handwritten about 8 hours later. That form was copied onto the computer about two weeks later.

Rare Bird Report

Species: Yellow Grosbeak (Pheucticus chrysopheplus)

Date: 2 December 1990

Location: Elkhart, Polk Co., Iowa

Observers: Tim Schantz, Tom Schantz, Jim Fuller, Jim Scheib, Ann Johnson, Denny & Cecil Thompson, The Mosmans & others

Equipment: Zeiss 10X40B

Description: Massive black triangular bill, lower mandible pale, crown streaked with black and dark cheek patch. Bright gold eyeline. Bird was predominantly yellow with an orange wash on the throat and breast. Back was greenish with bold dark streaks. Wings black with two wing bars and white tips on the secondaries. Noticeable white vent. Rump yellow with faint white dots forming an indistinct "U". Tail dark with white visible only in flight.

Discussion: My brother Tom and I went to The Mosman's in hopes of finding the female Pine Grosbeak that was reported there. We joined about six other searchers. Jim Fuller and Jim Scheib located the bird in the wooded drainage behind the house. My brother and I reached them in time to see a flurry of yellow-green flying away. Jim Fuller quickly pointed out that the bird he saw was not a Pine Grosbeak. I replied by saying, "I looked more like an Evening". But Jim concluded that it wasn't that either. The four of us walked up the path to find the bird sitting on a low perch. I immediately recognized it as a Yellow Grosbeak, a bird I was familiar with from Southern Sonora and Northern Sinaloa, Mexico. It appeared to be an immature male as the bird was very bright and had a rusty wash on the breast. The Geo. guide shows the Male Yellow Grosbeak as having the "U" on the rump but not the Female. I couldn't find any text that separates immature males from females however.

With only accepted records in Arizona it would not be practical to automatically assume that this is a wild vagrant. I have seen this species (and a multitude of others) in cages in Mexico. It is a pretty, hearty, seed eating bird with a thrushlike song that makes it a good candidate for the illegal bird trade. I have also seen this bird in captivity at The Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson, Arizona. I contacted the Henry Dorley Zoo in Omaha, Nebraska, where Lisa Cuevas Assistant Supervisor of Birds informed me that she had never heard of a Yellow Grosbeak and they did not have one in their collection. On 12/13/90 Bob Lestovica the supervisor of birds at Henry Dorley Zoo contacted me and reported that he tracked down all The Yellow Grosbeaks in captivity for a total of 4 in the U.S. One male at The Sonoran Desert Museum, One male at the San Diego Zoo, and A pair at The Roger William's Zoo in Providence, R.I. (401-941-3910). When asked about captive breeding

programs he replied that the only successful (Pheucticus) breeding in captivity is a pair of Rose Breasted Grosbeaks breeding at the Minnesota State Zoo. In talking with the people in Providence the pair was in a "breeding situation" in a large aviary with no success. I asked where they obtained their pair and they directed me to a supplier in Laguna Hills, California. (714 785-9450) I contacted them and they indicated that it is illegal as of last year for anyone to own a Yellow Grosbeak. A pair they sold to The Fresno Zoo was confiscated by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife and the deal nullified. They mentioned that they had heard of no captive breeding programs prior to the passage of recent laws making them illegal. They mentioned that they have had pairs with no breeding and that all the birds they have moved were imported.

It seems unlikely that a cage reared bird would be able to withstand the harshest snow storm in five years in Iowa. This bird's plumage is remarkably fresh for a bird that just hopped out of a cage. Another interesting clue is the fact that this bird could be seen feeding on wild foods. I have photographs of the bird eating berries in the ravine behind The Mosman's house. It is skiddish and generally does not allow close approach. The wooded ravine that the bird seeks refuge in is not unlike habitat in Mexico that the species inhabits. This species is a known vagrant into the United States and it would not be right to discount this species ability to make it to Iowa on it's own.

I got in touch with Wayne Ellington of The National Weather Service who when I mentioned our situation pointed out that we have had some consistent South-Southwest winds lately and that they would be more than willing to provide the IOU records committee with the data.

I contacted Rich Stallcup who directed me to William Ryan. William Ryan has written articles and studied the differences in wild vagrants vs cage reared birds. He is also very knowledgeable when it comes to tropical birds. When I asked him if he has heard of bizarre records of this species he immediately replied that he had seen one near Victoria, Tamaulipas, many hundreds of miles and a mountain range away from the bird's known range in West Mexico. He also pointed out that The Black-Thighed Grosbeak of Central America (considered the same species by many) will show up in very unlikely spots from time to time. He mentioned that an immature bird would not be an likely candidate for the rare bird trade in that they do not sing and are not nearly as attractive. Also he gave me a list of things to look for if the bird could be captured.

1. Is the primary webbing intact? Not frayed on the ends. Fraying could indicated long distance travel.
2. Is the scaling on the feet in good condition? Captive birds often develop fungus due to poor living conditions.
3. Are there stress bars on the tail?
4. Are the toenails long? Long toe nails would indicate that the bird has been living in a cage.

In answer to the questions, after many hours of close observation, is that there is nothing to indicate that this bird is a released captive other than it has never occurred anywhere near here.

I also contacted Dr. David DeSante who is head of The

Institute for Bird Populations in Inverness California. He is an expert on the migration of birds and mentioned that "total misorientation in species that make seasonal movements happens occasionally." The Yellow Grosbeak does make seasonal movements and is normally found only in Southern Mexico during our winters. The timing of the occurrence would fit a bird that was misoriented at the time of its seasonal movement and ended up where the winds took it.

Hopefully we can find a few clues as to the origin of this remarkable bird. Lets not forget the fact that this year a surprising number of Southwestern species have shown up in the Northeast. Including an apparent Hepatic Tanager in Davenport. This fall a Sulpher-bellied Flycatcher turned up in New Brunswick. (this species occurs nowhere near the U.S. border this time of year) Painted Redstart in New York. What about a Yellow Grosbeak showing up in our own back yards?

If nothing else lets just hope that Iowa birder's can learn a valuable lesson from this. That is, to keep a totally open mind when out birding. It scares me to think that this bird could have been passed off as a Pine Grosbeak had it not stuck around and was not reported to The Iowa Bird Line that Jim Fuller has been doing such a wonderful job on.

I have identifiable photos that may be duplicated for Iowa Records Committee use.

Photos have been submitted to Stephen Bailey of California Academy of Sciences and Dr. Richard Banks at The Museum of Natural History with a list of specific questions. When I receive an answer I will submit them to the records committee.

Tim Schantz
309 E Robinson
Knoxville IA 50138

DOCUMENTATION FORM

For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

What species? Yellow Grosbeak How many? 1
 Location? 2 mi. East, 1/2 mi. S. of Elkhart, Polk Co., IA.
 Type of Habitat? Brushy woods, adjacent to backyard feeder
 When? date(s): 12-2-90 time: 11:00 to 11:30 a.m.
 Who? your name and address: Ken Londer, RR3, Box 54, Iowa City
 Others with you: John Daniel, Cedar Rapids, IA.

Others, before or after you: 10-15 other people were present at the same time we were there; unaware of later observers.

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Size - bird appeared about the same size as a Robin. The bird was earlier reported as - pine grosbeak. It was immediately apparent to me that such was not the case. The bird has a large bill, with the lower mandible lighter in color, than the dark upper bill. Bright yellow head & breast w/ a slight reddish/orangish tinge. Belly yellow. Under-tail - white. Wings and tail - black with white irregular spots. Flight feathers appeared in excellent condition - no evidence of wear/damage. Back was streaked - Black w/ olive-green stripes extended into nape and onto crown. Yellow eye line. Dark eye. Did not hear the bird call. Observed the bird at feeder and taking food off of ground 30 yards from my feeder. Bird did not appear tame. Reacted w/ startle and immediate flight, for example, at the call of a nearby Blue Jay.

Similar species; how eliminated:

Evening Grosbeak. Much brighter yellow overall - much less white markings on wings. This bird has prominent striping on back. E. Grosbeak has none.
 Pine Grosbeak - P.G. has much smaller bill relative to its overall size. Y.G. had a very large bill; P.G. (♀) is drab yellow-olive. This bird was vivid yellow. No marked striping on back of P.G. Also has wing bars which were absent in Y.G.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? Yes

If yes, explain: One other person was sure that we were seeing a Pine Grosbeak.

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Excellent mid-winter morning light. Beach & Lamb Elite 8x40 binoculars - range 40-50 ft. on one occasion; range 10 yards on the other.
 Previous experience with species and similar ones: None with yellow; Pine and Evening both seen previously on several occasions.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Western Peterson Field Guide
NBS Field Guide

How long before field notes made? Same day this form completed? 2 days

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Yellow Grosbeak - juvenile male

Location: southeast of Elkhart, Polk County, Iowa

Habitat: backyard feeding station with wooded ravine behind

Date: 2 December 1990

Time: 12:30 pm to 2:30 pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: Tim and Tom Schantz, Dean and Diane Mossman, Dennis and Cecile Thompson, Eugene and Eloise Armstrong, Jim Fuller, Jim Scheib

Description of bird: This bird was feeding at a platform feeder in front of a brush pile. The body length was comparable to a nearby blue jay but the tail was shorter and the body was plumper. I initially saw the bird from the rear and observed a yellow head with sharply defined fine black streaks on the crown, a yellow nape either streaked very finely or with small black dots, heavy black streaking on an olive-yellow back, and a slate gray tail which was unnotched. When the bird flicked its wings, the rump was visible and it was olive-yellow with black streaks. As the bird appeared at the feeder from time to time, it was well observed from other angles and the following characteristics were noted. The overall color of the bird was a mustard yellow. The head, in addition to the black streaks on the crown, had a dark triangular cheek patch which emphasized the bright yellow superciliary. The bill was dark and enormous. The lower mandible was a shade lighter in color and the upper mandible curved high on to the head. It was not only thick but long, especially compared to a cardinal standing beside it. It gave the cardinal the appearance of having a dainty bill! The eye was black. From the front the bird had a yellow throat, breast and belly with no markings, but there was a bit of an orangish wash to the breast. It had dark legs and feet with no sign of a band. The upper tail coverts were gray with distinct white tips creating a semi-circle of white dots at the base of the tail. The wings were dark gray with white tips to the tertials and secondaries which created an interesting black/white pattern of dots on the inner wing. The greater wing coverts were also tipped in white creating a white wing bar. There was a small white patch in the upper part of the primaries. The lesser wing coverts (shoulder area) were olive with black streaks. The feathers looked fairly fresh with little sign of wear or stress. Although the bird flew a couple of times as I watched, I never got good looks at it in flight. The streaking on the crown would indicate a female or juvenile. Because of the bright mustard yellow color and the presence of the wash on the breast, we judged this bird to be a juvenile male.

Similar species and how eliminated:

Evening Grosbeak eliminated by dark bill, streaking on back and crown, yellow throat and breast, position of white feathering on wings, and squared tail. Female Pine Grosbeak was eliminated by the streaking on back and crown, yellow throat and breast, size of the bill, white feathering on wings, and squared tail. The bird had more similarity to a first year male Black-headed Grosbeak, but it was eliminated by the mustard yellow as opposed to buffy color, olive streaked with black back rather than brown, streaked olive rump, and less neatly

pronounced wingbars. Fall tanagers and orioles could be eliminated by a combination of the identifiable characteristics, especially bill size and shape.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? Not by the time I got there, although I understand that initially there were several doubts

If yes, explain: Concern seemed to revolve around aberrant grosbeaks

Viewing conditions (lighting, distance, optics): The bird was primarily observed at a platform feeder about 30 feet away although it was also seen through the trees behind the area. Observation was through 7x26 binoculars. The sky was overcast.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have a reasonable amount of experience with pine and evening grosbeaks but none with this species.

References and persons consulted before writing description: NGS Birds of North America, Peterson's Mexican Birds.

How long before field notes made? 1 hour after observation upon return home How long before this form completed? same evening

Discussion regarding vagrancy:

Pros: Juvenile males more prone to wander; fresh plumage with no signs of wear from being caged; strong weather systems from the southwest prior to first sighting; no leg band or any other form of marking; Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher record in New Brunswick this fall; lower likelihood of juvenile being caged

Cons: Common cage bird in Mexico; proximity of Elkhart to both I35 and I80, major thoroughfares for transcontinental traffic; no history of vagrancy outside of Arizona

DOCUMENTATION OF EXTRAORDINARY BIRD SIGHTING

Yellow Grosbeak, southeast of Elkhart, Polk County, IA, 5 December 1990

Observer: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246

Other observers: Bob Cecil and Dick Tetrault with me, many others before and after.

Time: 10:16 to 10:37 a.m.

Habitat: rural home with feeders and wooded ravine behind.

Description: A yellow-breasted bird with dark wings and tail and body size similar to nearby Northern Cardinal when both are perched in a deciduous tree. The general shape of the body and head are consistent with that of a grosbeak [or an oriole as noted in one reference]. The large, triangular bill is about half as deep as the length of the head. The upper mandible is convex and the lower mandible slightly concave. The lower part of the bill extends further into the face than the upper part, and the base of the upper mandible is about three times as thick as that of the lower mandible. The upper mandible is dark, almost black, as is the tip of the lower mandible. The proximal part of the lower mandible is more flesh-colored. The top of the head is olive with very fine black or brown streaking. There is a bright yellow superciliary line extending from the middle of the upper mandible to the nape. The eye is black and without an eye ring. There is a well-defined, olive auricular patch extending from the mandible through the eye to the nape and then downward and forward with maximum depth just behind the eye and extending back up to the mandible. The nape is soft gray with a few brown streaks in the center of the gray area. The throat, breast, and belly are bright yellow with orange-yellow centrally on the upper breast. I did not see streaks on the breast but Bob Cecil said that he saw some streaks on the sides when the bird raised its wings. The undertail coverts are white. The back and scapulars are olive with well-defined, black, elongated-oval streaks. The wings are dark, almost black. There are two distinct wing bars that look different from time to time as the bird moves. At one time the bars diverged from medial to lateral at about a 30 degree angle and with the lower bar split so that the medial portion is more anterior. At other times the bars more parallel and the lower bar is not split. The tertials have small white tips that are seen more posteriorly near the rump. I did not note the rump color, but Bob Cecil said it was light yellow. The tail is dark like the wings and slightly notched. The under surface of the tail may have been lighter than the upper surface. I did not note the leg color. The bird sat in a tree for about five minutes before dropping down to a feeder, which was a board on a stump about a foot off the ground and covered with what appeared to be cracked corn.

Song: Not heard.

Behavior: Perched in tree and feeding on open feeder.

Conditions: The bird was first viewed from about 25 yards with 10x binoculars and 20x scope and then at about 10 yards (using the side of the house as a blind) with 420 mm lens and 10x binoculars. The bird was in bright sunlight with sun behind me.

Similar species: I have not yet located a full description of the plumages of Yellow Grosbeak. I will await this information and review by ornithologists familiar with this species before being sure of the identification and plumage of this bird. The bill and plumage exclude Pine Grosbeak and the color and markings differ from any plumage of Black-headed Grosbeak that I have seen. The decision on the origin of this bird will be more difficult and awaits further research.

Agreement: Observers seem to agree on the identification, but I would like to see this confirmed by more detailed literature and expert review of the documentations and photos.

Previous experience: none.

References/time used: NGS Guide, Peterson's Mexican Guide before and during viewing. I looked at a number of references at the Biology Library at the University of Iowa that provided no more information. I did a computerized search of Zoological Records 1978-1990 and failed to find any citations of Yellow Grosbeak.

Time of notes: I dictated notes to Bob Cecil while I viewed the bird through a scope as it sat in the tree. I incorporated these notes into the above description which was handwritten the next day and typed a week later.

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

90-42

What species? Yellow Grosbeak How many? 1
Location? Elkhart, Polk County, Iowa
Type of Habitat? Feeder near woodland
When? date(s): Dec. 5, 1990 time: 10:30 to 10:45 appx
Who? your name and address: Robert Cecil 1315 41st St. Des Moines 50311
Others with you: Tom kent, Dick Tetrault
Others before or after you: zillions

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

(Forgive my brevity - my notes wound up with another birder)

Overall size similar to Rose-breasted Grosbeak, as was general body structure. The upper breast and throat were a very bright yellow - to me, similar in color to a Chat. The remaining underparts were slightly paler, but still a bright yellow. Undertail coverts were whitish.

The crown was olive yellow with yellow streaking. Face showed an olive auricular patch against a yellowish background. The bird's back was olive yellow with conspicuous heavy streaking.

Tail slightly notched.

Bill very heavy - more massive than I recall on a Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

Bird fairly warily approached the feeder, but appeared relatively calm as it fed.

No sounds noted.

Similar species; how eliminated: Breast far too bright for Evening Grosbeak, or female Pine or Black-headed Grosbeak.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? Not after final identification
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Viewing good from distance of about 40'. 10x40 Binoculars and 20x scope.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Have not seen Pine Grosbeak nor Yellow Grosbeak.

References and persons consulted before writing description: None

How long before field notes made? 15 minutes
at time this form completed? 24 hours.

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).

DOCUMENTATION OF AVIAN SIGHTING IN IOWA

YELLOW GROSBEAK

1 IMMATURE OR FEMALE 6 DEC 1990

Dean Mosman residence, 2mi e Elkhart,
Polk County

After hearing that a Yellow Grosbeak had been seen at the Mosman residence, and as I was in Des Moines for a meeting, I went to the location of the sighting, arriving at about 3.30 pm. Dean Mosman met me and we watched his feeders from inside the house until the bird appeared at about 4 pm. We watched it for about 15 minutes as it perched in nearby trees and fed for a few minutes on cracked corn on a ground-level feeding tray.

(See attached copy of my field notes).

The bird was a little smaller than nearby Blue Jays, and appeared essentially bright yellow underneath and greenish above, with a very heavy dark bill. Crown and nape were greenish, with fine dark streaking; back was also greenish, lighter than crown, and had more obvious dark streaking; tail was brownish, not particularly dark. Wings were dark greenish, with bold white markings. There was a short wingbar in the area of the bend of the wing, a bold wingbar about mid-way in the primaries which extended through the primaries and onto the secondaries (also about midway in the secondaries), and white or very pale buffy tips to the secondaries. Underparts were bright yellow, with a tinge of orange in the upper breast area, forming a necklace of sorts. The eye was dark, as was the bill, which was longer than those of Evening Grosbeak or Blue Grosbeak, and thus more massive than either, relative to the size of the bird. There was a yellow superciliary line which contrasted strongly with the darker greenish crown and the darker greenish cheeks.

These features indeed indicate that the bird was an immature or female Yellow Grosbeak, as previous observers had concluded (fide Dean Mosman).

The bird appeared alert, and essentially alone. It perched rather high in the trees while preening; about 20 feet or higher.

While I agree with the identification, there must be a question of provenance. I understand that this species has been recorded in Arizona as a post-breeding wanderer. That this bird in Iowa may have been an immature, and that we have had some strong southerly winds and mild late fall weather might at least allow the conjecture that it is a genuine stray from Mexico. Nothing about the bird suggested its recent captivity, but if it was an adult female, it might have molted in the wild since escape and prior to its appearance in Iowa. A decision on provenance must take into account the frequency of captivity and the possibility of transportation northward for this species, as well as whether other records for this fall occurred in the southern United States or even northern Mexico.

Ross Silcock, PO Box 300, Tabor, IA 51653

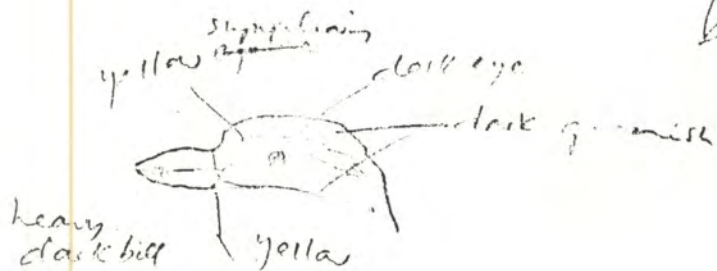
Yellow finch (imm?) 12/6/90

Mosman residence

90-42

Eltham, VA

ca 4 pm



bird a little smaller than last, bluish

cran ~~dark~~ greenish, black streaks

underparts bright yellow except
u/tail coverts - white

tail brownish

back greenish, ~~st~~ heavy black streaks

shoulder brown pale

higher pale (gr. coverts) - continued
across primaries & secondaries

also white tips on secondaries

streaked on



shoulder bar

streaked greenish back

white across 10/6 20

white pale tips secondaries

bird appeared alert -
fed briefly at cracked
corn. Perched in trees
20' + from ground; preened
a little. Basically
alone.

Seen with Dean Mosman

Record No. 1380

4 Ltr Code YEGR

Documentation of Iowa Sighting

NGS-380

First Name	Yellow		
Last Name	Grosbeak		
Sci Name	Pheucticus chrysopheplus		
How many?	1	Date	12/8/90
City	Elkhart	St/Prov	IA
Co.		Nation	USA
Place Code		Diane Moseman's	
Hab. Code	FDR	Feeder	
St. Life List	Yes	N.A. Life List	Yes

Notes	
Location: 2 m. e. of Elkhart, IA, Polk Co. Habitat: Feeders at edge of wooded ravine. Other viewers: Tim Schantz, Sandy Komito, Louis Banker, Michael Porter, Diane Moseman, Beth Brown, Gladys Black, James Huntington.	
Viewing conditions: bright sunny day, bird in full sun and in light shade. I viewed through Leica 10X40 binoculars and Kowa scope.	
References studied before visiting bird but not between viewing bird and writing notes: Peterson West, National Geographic, Peterson Mexican Birds.	
Flag 1	Yes
Flag 2	Yes

Description from my notes, made immediately after bird flew away on each of two observations, before consulting books or discussing with others. Parts in parentheses are being added from memory today, December 12, 1990.

Dec. 8, 1990, 2:30 - 2:32 P.M. (approx) at Mosemans' feeder — A brilliantly colorful, chunky passerine bird that appeared about the size and shape of a yellow grosbeak. Bright yellow breast, more golden (more orangy) in the center of the breast. Bill very large, black (shape of pine grosbeak's), upper mandible strongly curved and I think longer than lower. Back olive with black streaks, which are heavy, distinct, and with (clean) sharp edges. White undertail coverts. Black wings with white spots, which do not form distinct wingbars, but scattered patches. Yellow supercilium. Plumage appeared to be in excellent condition, not worn or damaged. (Bird came to trees at edge of wooded ravine and studied the situation for a while before making a short trip to a ground-level cracked-corn feeder closest to woods and farthest from viewers, about 40 feet from me, by my guess. It seemed alert and nervous. I don't think it ate its fill before retreating to woods, where it remained in view at greater distance for another minute or two.) After bird left I viewed Tim Schantz's slides of bird taken Dec. 2 and noted features I would look for at next opportunity: color of lower mandible; zones of color on back; configuration of wing patches.

Dec. 9, 1990, 1:40 to 1:45 P.M., at Hutchins' feeder — Top of head, nape, back of neck and upper back are olive YELLOW with fine dark streaks. (There's a difference in the streaks on crown and neck.) Mid and lower back are olive GREEN with heavier stripes. Rump is olive YELLOW, more like top of head, but unstreaked. Upper tail near rump had little not-distinct white bars, half or a third the width of base of tail, which were mostly obscured by wings. Wings: white tip at end of each secondary is a precise spot (as if painted with acrylic paint); wing bars are made of a distinct white spot on each feather — not a solid bar, but a string of angular beads; there is a white patch on folded outer primaries sort of like on male black-throated blue warbler. Outer tail feathers have lighter outside edges (not bold white like a junco). BRIGHT yellow supercilium, which is nevertheless slightly greenish. Darker auricular patch. Upper mandible black, lower mandible (nearly) white on lower part and dark on upper part. Breast even brighter yellow than throat. Flanks had very indistinct dark marks, hard to say whether light fine streaks or smudges. Bird was at distance of about 150 to 200 feet, measured by reading on Questar camera lens. (Bird appeared at ease and remained for about 5 minutes, flying suddenly when a jay said "caw.")

Similar species: Pine grosbeak's bill is smaller — this guy's was nearly as big as his head. Male evening grosbeak has large white wing patches and a dark crown, whereas this bird had only points of white on wings and had a golden head. Female/immature black-headed grosbeak's breast, throat, and supercilium are not gold, nor have black-headed such bright, clear olive tones in back. No other North American grosbeak has such a large or black bill.

No one questioned species of bird, even though this plumage is not illustrated in mentioned references, as other N. American birds were eliminated. There was major discussion of its origin.

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Carl J. Bendorf
845 Cypress Court
Iowa City, IA 52245

Yellow Grosbeak

December 26, 1990 approx. 10:40 am to 10:55 am
Dean Mosman residence, RR Elkart in Polk Co.

Jim Scheib and Dick Tetrault of Iowa City and I arrived about 10:30 am and took station at the propane tanks in the corner of the Mosman yard. At 10:40, the grosbeak flew in low to the cracked corn feeder. It immediately hunched way down so its feet were not visible and its belly was on the feeder surface. As it steadily crunched on the cracked corn, I watched it through Scheib's 20X Kowa scope and dictated the following notes into a recorder while viewing the bird:

"At 10:40, the bird showed up. Sitting on the feeder with juncos, it is easily three times as large, perhaps the size of a cardinal. The bill (upper) is dark grayish-black; the lower mandible is primarily light pinkish except for at the upper edge and a little wider area at the base of the bill {where it is dark like the upper mandible}. The bill is extremely heavy, at least as large as an Evening Grosbeak bill. The eye is black.

The top of the head {and forehead to upper nape} is olive with some very light yellow streaking and also dark streaking. There is a yellow superciliary streak starting at the base of the bill, across the top of the eye, and extending again about the same distance behind the eye. The cheek patch starts at the base of the bill and is about the same color as the top of the head (olive with blackish streaking). On the lower cheek is another lighter yellow crescent. The back of the nape is similar to the top of the head but the dark streaks are a little larger and heavier.

The upper back, as I can see it, is colored with approximately equal amounts of faded olive and dark heavy black streaking. The throat and chin area is bright yellow, the upper breast is also bright yellow {with perhaps a stronger tinge of orange-yellow}. Down toward the lower breast is perhaps a little less vivid orange-yellow. The flanks appear to be yellowish-olive with some very light {faint} dark streaking. The tail is dark.

The wings are blackish with some relatively narrow pale feather edgings and there is a row of yellowish wing spots forming sort of a wing bar (upper). The bird is extremely hunkered down I can't see its feet or much of its back end at this time.

There seems to be a very very narrow yellowish skin around the eye, most visible below and perhaps to the rear of the eye but also over the top of the eye.

In the wing bar, there are perhaps 4-5 spots on the upper part of the folded wing and maybe 6-7 irregularly spaced in sort of a jagged line on a lower wing bar area.

The feathers of the scapular area are black centered with very broad olive tips.

The bird has now turned and the feet appear to be dark. The upper rump looks yellowish and heavily flecked with black. The tail is grayish brown proximally and darker brown at the distal end. There seems to be one or two white spots or edges to the rump feathers right above where the tail starts. There is also, in addition to the wing bar type spotting, there is spotting on the tips of what appear to be the tertials and secondaries.

The bird is whitish under the rump.

To recap, the quality of the top of the head is olive green; the breast is a bright yellow upper and fading towards the belly and the flanks which are lightly streaked with large dark marks. The back is more olive, a little more pure olive toward the lower back and a little more yellowish toward the upper back. The scapulars are similar to the lower back. The wings are not really black but more grayish brown as is the tail.

The tailfeathers look relatively complete, they might be a little ragged toward the end; can't really say for sure. At about 10:55, the bird turned to fly off down the hillside and as it turned, I could see that the long tail feathers did look in relatively good shape and the tail was slightly forked or notched.

Conditions: It was mostly clear sky at our backs. The distance was about 30 yards. I used 10X40 Zeiss binos and Scheib's 20X Kowa scope.

This is my first encounter with Yellow Grosbeak.

The description in quotes above was dictated immediately after the sighting. This full documentation was typed up on the 27th.

Sat Dec 29

Dear Mrs Masman,

On behalf of the others & myself we really appreciated permission to stand south of the proposed tank to watch for the yellow greenback. We did just that and did see the bird after 1 PM, the 28th.

Dr. Dave Easterle who talked to you is the top birder in the state as well as top authority in Mo. He is also chairman of the Mo rare bird committee. He has seen many yellow greenbacks in Mexico. He said if a bird did show up in the US in the winter it would be a disoriented immature bird (which yours is). The resident birds leave Mexico in the winter probably to S. America. As you no doubt know the only US records are summer adult birds in southern Ariz. It is Dave's opinion that your bird ~~was~~ which shows no feather wear from cages is a wild bird. Its actions seem to indicate that it ~~might~~ would probably not have been a caged bird.

Thanks again

Dr Leo Galloway (St Joseph, Mo)

Dr Dave Easterle (Maryville, Mo)

Jack Hilsbeck (Boonville, Mo)

Oh yes, we also saw the Ivory Gull at
The Isom at Pella