Yellow Rail at Horicon Marsh
Saturday, May 19, I was leading a 1984 WSO Convention Field Trip to the interior of Horicon Marsh. We were driving and walking the Old Marsh Road and produced several species, including several Virginia and Sora Rails. We had parked the cars at the lot at the pumping station and walked north on the road. After about 100 to 120 feet Sam Robbins pointed out a small rail moving off the near edge of the road bank and start to swim across a small channel of water. He called out "Sora Rail" to the group. About that time the rail took flight. A small, dark, chunky bird flew the remaining distance across the channel and disappeared a short distance out into a mass of cattails. When the bird took flight the most noticeable feature was the white wing flashes in the secondary feather area. Everyone in the group that saw the bird fly noticed this feature. As soon as the white patches were noticed and the bird disappeared into the cattails, Sam and I turned and looked at one another and almost simultaneously said "Yellow Rail".

Jeff Baughman
Kewaskum, WI

Yellow Rail
First seen swimming in drainage ditch at 30 feet. First impression was small size (Sora or smaller), streaked back, light and dark, light and dark not clearly seen as to precise color, since light conditions were imperfect, and short, stubby bill. But initial thoughts of sora were suddenly dispelled when the bird flew into nearby marsh grass. Broad whitish wing patches in each wing were vivid. It was also evident that the lighter back streaks were yellow-brown rather than gray-brown. It was in retrospect that we (six other observers - group led by Jeff Baughman) recalled that the bill was not the vivid yellow, surrounded by black facial spot, that a sora would have shown. The entire observation lasted no more than 15 seconds at about 5:30 a.m. with morning mist dissipating.

Sam Robbins
Medford, WI
Smith’s Longspur in Columbia County
I stopped at a muddy area on Harvey Road to observe waterfowl. At the north edge of the water was some corn stubble with manure spread on it. Here is where I first noticed a small sparrow-size bird fly towards me. The white outer tail feathers were easily noticed when the bird landed. This bird had a general buffiness to its appearance. The only thought going through my mind was “what is it?” As it hopped over a clump of dirt, a near-ideal breeding plumaged male was seen. The striking black and white head pattern really stuck out. The entire underparts were buff colored. The distinctive white wing coverts were seen, but appeared to be a little ragged in appearance. I was so impressed by the bird that some of the less characteristic marks were not noticed. As these birds fed the white on the females wing was casually noticed. Also another male was seen briefly. Its plumage was not as clean about the head. The triangular patch was faded, with the inner area being more buff than white. I returned to the better plummed male and watched for maybe another 2 to 3 minutes. Then the birds took off and I noticed 4 birds flying. They were lost in flight, moving west. A short time later a huge flock of Laplands arrived. No Smith’s could be found among them. The two groups appeared to be separate.

Randy Hoffman
Waunakee, WI

Lazuli Bunting at Spooner, WI
We have been trying to lure bluebirds to nest in our bluebird houses. One morning, May 6th, I think it was, I saw a “blue bird” on our back fence, about 50 feet away. Then it flew to a branch on the catalpa tree which is about 10 feet from our window. That is when I realized it was much too small to be a bluebird. The same day, in mid-afternoon it appeared again on the lawn, right under our window. An Indigo Bunting was nearby. They were both feeding on cracked corn my husband had scattered for our daily visitors, a pair of Mourning Doves.
I was this time I realized this tiny “blue bird” was not a bluebird. Its whole head was entirely blue with a patch of orangy color on its breast. Its beak was thinner than a bluebirds. This beautiful little specimen kept coming back 2 or 3 times a day, for about 10 days and I had no available camera outside of a polaroid to try to get its picture. I did take one through the window (with the screen on yet!)
It wasn’t until I looked up the Indigo Bunting in our bird books that I found out that I was watching a Lazuli Bunting. Even then I wondered, since the Lazuli was listed as being a bird whose habitat was much farther west than Wisconsin! Then I became aware of the two white wing bars as is shown in the book.

Kay Ogren
Spooner, WI

(Editor’s Note: The picture must have been of good quality despite the conditions under which it was taken, as this was accepted by the records committee on this basis.)
Painted Bunting in Racine County

I was called on Friday (no date given) to be notified of the presence of the bird at the feeder. Saturday afternoon I went into the home and had to wait only about 10 minutes for the bird to arrive.

The bright red bottom, the red eye ring and the bright green back were more than enough to verify the identity of this finch. Since I had had a full plumaged male in my hand once before, there was not doubt in my mind as to the identity of this colorful male. Photographs were taken.

The bird fed with some male Indigo Buntings and stayed the whole time I was there for full opportunity to observe as much as was desired. Another full plumaged male was seen the same day west of Racine at a feeder.

Edward Prins
Racine, WI

Lark Bunting in Bayfield County

(Just West of Ashland on Hwy. May 26, 1984, about 7:30 p.m. Close to Ashland County line.)

On the first full day of our Northern Wisconsin trip, Jeff and Scott Baughman, my wife, Wendy and I were stopping to watch a couple of families of Mute Swans, when I caught a glimpse of a smallish dark bird with white wing flashes zipping past the windshield and into the brush along the road. It was too brief a look to provide a positive identification, but Lark Bunting did cross my mind, even though I thought it was more likely an aberrant red-wing, (or else tricks being played on my eyes).

After watching the swans for several minutes, and looking along the road for this bird, we were just about ready to leave when suddenly it flew down to the gravel shoulder of the road just ahead of us. It took no more than a quick check with the binoculars to confirm the I.D. - we were looking at a Lark Bunting, a life bird for all of us!

We watched it for a short while, and then Jeff and I scurried to get our cameras. We needn’t have rushed, however, for the beautiful adult male returned repeatedly to the gravel on both sides of the road. Jeff and I both shot numerous photos of the fairly obliging subject, but unfortunately the frequently passing cars and trucks would always flush the bird before we got as close as we wanted to.

Description: A medium-small sized bird, (perhaps slightly smaller than a cowbird), mostly black in color, except for the obvious white wing patches, which appeared as a kind of “splash” across the folded wing. In flight the twin wing patches were also very evident, extending from the wing coverts down across the inner secondaries and the tertials.

Also of note was the shiny, conical-shaped bill, which stood out in sharp contrast from the jet black of the bird’s head. The lower mandible was brightest, often appearing almost white in good light.

Thomas Schultz
Green Lake, WI
Laughing Gull at Manitowoc

Upon reaching Manitowoc Harbor about 6:45 p.m. on May 16, 1984 near the end of our Big Day Count, Jeff Baughman, Bill Volkert and I jogged our way out onto the North Breakwater, and then down the west side of the impoundment. Almost immediately we spotted a dark-mantled gull standing among the numerous Bonaparte’s and Ring-billed Gulls, and Caspian and Common Terns on the mud flats area. At first the gull was standing facing away from us with its bill tucked into its back feathers in a resting posture, and we thought it was probably a Franklin’s. Within a minute or so, however, when some disturbance caused many of the surrounding gulls and terns to take flight, (and while we were observing the bird through scopes,) it opened its wings as if prepared to fly, but remained standing. During this brief glimpse (about 2-3 seconds) we immediately noted the pattern of the opened wings - dark gray coverts, secondaries and inner primaries, blending directly into the large black patches of the outer primaries, with no white between. The trailing edge of each open wing showed a white border which was fairly broad along the secondaries, but which tapered down more narrowly through the inner primaries, until disappearing just before the outer black primaries. Now that the bird was alert and “opened up”, we could easily see the long, fairly massive, bright blood-red bill with a definite “droop” at the tip. We knew immediately that this was no Franklin’s Gull - it was a Laughing Gull! (See accompanying sketches).

The adult breeding-plumaged bird (with complete black “hood”) was now standing perpendicular to our line of sight, and we could discern other features which confirmed our identification. We noted the narrow white eye crescents above and below the eye, which were separated by a broad gap at the rear. (Franklin’s would have shown broader eye-crescents, only narrowly separated at the rear.) The long wing tips at rest projected far beyond the tail tip (at least two inches) and were almost completely black, with only tiny white primary tips. (Franklin’s stubbier wing tips would have shown much less projection beyond the tail, and larger more noticeable white primary tips.) The long wing tips gave the body profile a longer, more tapered shape, characteristic of Laughing Gulls, while Franklin’s Gulls’ shorter wing tips would have given a “stockier” appearance.

The legs of this gull appeared quite dark or blackish with a reddish tinge. In overall body size, it was much larger than the surrounding Bonaparte’s (with a much darker mantle color) while close in size to the ring-bills just behind.

As we searched through the other gulls and terns, we would repeatedly turn our scopes back to the Laughing Gull, each time re-confirming our identification. After 10 or 15 minutes, we were joined by Charles Sontag, who told us that he had also identified the bird as Laughing Gull, and that it had been there the last couple of days.

I have personally seen Laughing Gulls on several occasions on the Atlantic Coast and in Florida, where the birds are abundant and easy to observe. This individual was a perfectly representative Laughing Gull in every way, immaculate in its prime adult breeding plumage.

Thomas Schultz
Green Lake, WI
P.S. This same bird (presumably) was also present on May 18, 1984, and was observed by many members of WSO during the pre-convention field trip to Manitowoc. We observed the standing bird at leisure and again noted the above mentioned field marks.

NOTE: We did not know at the time that Laughing Gull remained "hypothetical" on Wisconsin's bird list — (It is listed as a "one-asterisk" bird, even on the new state checklist) — or we certainly would have taken photographs. On May 16th we were pressed for time due to our Big Day Count, and on the 18th we were leading the WSO pre-convention field trip, and busy in that regard. As I mentioned above, I have seen many Laughing Gulls previously, as well as numerous Franklin's in Wisconsin and Manitoba, and as a result of my gull and tern illustration work for the National Geographic Field Guide to The Birds of North America, became very familiar with their distinctive field markings. I am also aware of the controversy surrounding the field separation of Laughing Gulls from 2nd year Franklin's Gulls, and the resulting disqualification of numerous previous Laughing Gull sightings in Wisconsin and elsewhere. There is no doubt in my mind that this individual was a Laughing Gull.

Arctic Tern at Ashland Harbor

Species: Arctic Tern
Date: May 24, 1984
Time bird seen: 10:15 to 10:25
Location: Pilings at east end of Ashland Harbor

Most times when I have stopped at this vantage point, the terns, gulls and cormorants have been perched on the more distant pilings, 1/8 to 1/4-mile away. On this occasion a group of ten white terns was perched on the nearer pilings 75-100 yards away. Most were Common Terns with snowy white breast, black caps, flattish heads and red bills with black tips.

Two birds stood out as being grayer on the breast. I studied one of these at length with 30x scope. Just beneath the black cap was a narrow whitish area that included the cheeks, blending into a grayer retion encompassing throat, breast and belly. Several times I switched to look at other terns, and could always come back to this one grayer individual.

The bill was solid red, with no black tip. The top of the head was more rounded than that of the neighboring commons. The legs appeared shorter; but at first I was not positive if the difference was due to the length of the legs, or to the position of the bird on the piling. But after seeing the bird take a couple of steps, I was satisfied that the legs themselves were shorter.

Checking the comparative length of folded wing and tail feathers was not possible because the bird was facing me. I had hoped to check wing pattern when the bird would fly. But just as I was zeroing in on the second grayer-breasted individual, the entire flock took flight. While I believe the second individual was also an Arctic, I could not be positive. When the birds came to rest on some more distant pilings, they were out of telescopic range.

Voice Description: Not Heard

Habitat: Old wooden pilings, surrounded by shallow water
Comparison with similar appearing species (including distinguishing points):
--solid black cap eliminated all small gulls
--size of Common and Forster’s Terns, eliminating Caspian and Least Terns
--grayish throat and breast, with only the cheek area white, eliminates Common and Forster’s Terns
--shorter legs than Common and Forster’s; top of head more rounded than neighboring Commons
--solid red bill was different from the black-tipped bills of the Commons
Distance: 75-100 yards

Optical Equipment: 10x binocs. 30x scope.
Weather (sky condition, wind, visibility): partly cloudy, mild breeze, conditions of observation favorable.
Previous experience with species: considerable previous experience in Massachusetts and Maine; three previous Wisconsin sightings, all in late May and early June.
Other members of observation party: none. Dick Verch and I sought this bird the next day; but birds were more distant and we were unable to pick it out.

Sam Robbins
Medford, WI

Yellow-throated Warbler at Wyalusing State Park

On my way north to Crex Meadows to join Randy Hoffman for a Big Day Count, I spent about two hours birding Wyalusing State Park. While covering the pine grove near the beginning of the Long Valley Road, I located Redstarts, two Pileated Woodpeckers and a distant singing Kentucky Warbler. After about 10 minutes I was returning to the car when I heard what I felt was a Yellow-throated Warbler singing across the road. Pishing brought the bird directly above me in a partially leaved out tree. Frustratingly I could not locate it. Continued pishing flushed it from its high perch where it flew across the road to another tree. This time I was able to locate it and watch it for several minutes before it flew back into the pines. During this time the yellow throat, black-striped sides, white breast, gray head, back, wings and tail, white wingbars and the white eyestripe with black below it were noted. Its song was a slurred tew.

Voice Description (if heard): slurred tew
Habitat: Deciduous and conifer woods

Comparison with similar appearing species (including distinguishing points): Female Blackburnian Warbler has more dull markings -- on head, cheek and stripes on side of breast. Also the Blackburnian has markings on the back.
Distance: 100 feet
Optical equipment: 10x binoculars
Weather (sky condition, wind, visibility): clear
Previous experience with species: seen several times in Wisconsin; also on southern trips
Other members of observation party: none
Books, illustrations, advice consulted: Peterson’s and Robbins books

Daryl Tessen
2 Pioneer Park Place
Elgin, Illinois 60120

Lesser Black-backed Gull at Kewaunee

On Thursday, March 29, 1984, during my spring break, I decided to cover the northern L. Michigan area (Kewaunee to Manitowoc). Upon arriving at Kewaunee several thousand gulls were discovered in the harbor-impoundment-river area. Most were sitting on the ice and sand in the impoundment, consisting of Ring-billeds (predominately) and Herrings. After carefully scanning these we moved to view the gulls on the ice in the river by the harbor. Finding nothing different I directed my attention to the north breakwater which had a smaller number. Almost immediately a very dark-black looking gull was seen. Switching from 10x binoculars to 15-60x scope I was surprised to indeed discover a black-backed gull. What surprised me was the gull’s size, from the great distance about Herring, not noticeably larger as is characteristic of the several Great Black-backeds I have seen in the state. Because the other member of the party could not locate it, the car was moved. Upon rescanning the gulls we were dismayed to find the gull no longer present. Hoping it had only flown into the impoundment we again moved the car. Almost immediately the gull was discovered among the Herrings near the south end of the impoundment. The bird continued to preen itself, slowly moving away from the Herrings. Again its small size was most striking. By now I strongly suspected the possibility of a Lesser Black-backed. However for the first five minutes its legs were obscured by a sleeping Herring. While waiting for it to move the following points were seen:

1. slightly smaller than the adjacent Herrings
2. black back and wings
3. white head, breast-indicating full breeding plumage—also tail
4. bill color -- yellow with red spot; bill size - small and slender in contrast to a Great Black-backed
5. Primaries bordered in white, with a few white spots on the outer tips.

Finally the bird scratched its head with the left leg -- yellow colored -- seemed quite dark. A Lesser Black-backed Gull!!! For the next 15-20 minutes it was leisurely studied and enjoyed while it moved out into full view. It was still present when we left.

While this is a lifer, the very dark (black, not gray) back and wings which seemed so similar to the one adult Great Black-backed I have seen (rest were immatures) suggests the rarer race L. f. fusces. This point was not discovered until research that evening in the Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding vol. 2.

(All particulars relative to the observation and identifying points were noted on the day’s field checklist before any books were consulted, approximately 20 minutes into the sighting.)

Daryl Tessen
2 Pioneer Park Place
Elgin, Illinois 60120
Great Gray Owl Specimen

At the WSO convention I was told by four separate individuals about a Great Gray Owl (Strix nebulosa) being picked up by the crew of the Mead Wildlife Area. Upon returning I contacted Mr. Tom Meyers, manager of the Mead Area and he confirmed the salvaging of a dead Great Gray Owl and told me who the taxidermist was and how to contact him. I wanted to verify it myself so I went and confirmed it. The taxidermist told me the bird had been seen for nearly two weeks along County Trunk C and that the bird had been dead for over a week before being salvaged by Mr. Meyers and Mark Randle, the wildlife intern at the Meade. He said it was slipping feathers quite badly but that he thought he could salvage it. He showed me the skin and the apparent brood patch suggesting it was a female. I took the carcass to Dr. Roger Krogstad, veterinarian at the Wildwood Animal Hospital in Marshfield and it was opened. It was a female in breeding condition and had three eggs in successive stages of development with the largest being +1 ¼ inches in diameter. I checked the area quite well but didn’t find any other birds or possible nesting site. The mount will be kept at the headquarters of the Meade Wildlife Area.

Don G. Follen, Sr.
9201 Rock Inn Road
Arpin, Wisconsin 54410

Western Tanager at Ashland

Species: Western Tanager
Location: 15 Miles west of Ashland - at the feeder of Paul and Nancy Ziman
Date: May 9, 1984
Time bird seen: 6:30 a.m. to 7:15 a.m.
Description of size, shape and color pattern. Describe in great detail. Record only what was actually seen in the field: Reddish head, yellow body, black wings (with two prominent wing bars), black tail. Bird was larger (slightly) than the Purple Finches it was feeding with. Slightly smaller than the Evening Grosbeaks.
Description of voice, if heard: Not heard
Description of behavior: Feeding on the ground with juncos, siskins, Evening Grosbeaks and Purple Finches. Occasionally would fly to a nearby tree for 50-60 seconds before returning to the ground.
Habitat - general: Feeder in a small clearing in a northern deciduous forest
Habitat - specific: Underneath a feeder
Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7, and 8: None - the birds color pattern is unique.
Distance (how measured): 40 - 25 ft. (estimated)-
Optical equipment: 8x44 Swift Audubon II Binoculars
Light (sky, position of sun): Clear day, sun was behind me
Previous experience with this and similar species: Saw this species in Arizona
Other observers: Ornithology Class
Did others agree with your identification? All identified it as Western Tanager.

Any independent identification: Nancy Ziman had identified it from a field guide.

References (books, etc.): Robbins, Peterson, National Geographic

Dick Verch
Ashland, Wisconsin 54806

1984 Sandhill Crane Count. Final Statewide Results from the International Crane Foundation, Baraboo.