

PENNSYLVANIA ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE
210 Welcome Ave. Norwood, PA 19074

8 February 2001

Arlene Koch
1375 Raubsville Road
Easton, PA 18042-9503

Dear Arlene,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the Townsend's Solitaire at Williams Township on 21 July 1997. After careful review, the committee has declined to accept the record. This is one of the most unusual cases the committee has evaluated in recent years. You are a trusted observer, and your details appeared to be adequate in describing a juvenile Townsend's Solitaire. Most of the committee members had complete confidence in the identification. A majority of members could not believe that it was remotely possible for a juv. solitaire to turn up in Pennsylvania by the third week of July. That seems to leave only two possibilities: either it was a solitaire but did not come here under its own power, or it was another species whose identity is not apparent to any of us. Neither alternative is satisfying, but what we considered the impossibility of a recently fledged solitaire flying to Pennsylvania overrode all other considerations.

The committee emphasizes that non-acceptance does not mean that the bird was not the species reported, but rather that the committee believes the documentation submitted does not support the identification conclusively. We hope that this will not discourage you from submitting documentation on any rarities you may find in the future.

Finally, the committee apologizes for the unacceptably long delay before all members were able to vote on the record. Circumstances beyond our control caused the problem, and we believe that we are back on a timely track.

Sincerely,

For the Committee:
Paul Hess, Chairman

P.S. Beginning this year observers will receive postcards acknowledging that the committee has received their documentation. In addition, whereas observers formerly were notified only when reports were not accepted (in disappointing or irritating letters like this one), they will now receive cards announcing that their records *have* been accepted.

Record #650-01-1997

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE

July 21, 1997, Northampton County, property of Arlene Koch

Following here is a description of a bird I saw at the edge of our lawn in a brush pile @ 10:45 a.m. on Monday, July 21, 1997.

The weather was hot and humid with a fair SW wind and partial cloud cover. Showers were predicted for later in the day but none had arrived as yet. I was out walking more for a break than anything else but, as usual, had my binoculars (Bausch & Lomb 10 X 42 Elite) with me.

I was in the area of our property between where the yard itself ends and the fields below begin, which we keep mowed so that the tractors and our truck can fit through when needed. To my left was a field which we mow down every year in the Spring and then just let grow up. To my right was a 6-ft wide and 30-ft long low pile of rocks that David collects and puts there for future use. Up against those rocks, closer in toward the house, is a 15-ft long brush pile in which right now a lot of sapling mulberry trees, pokeweed plants, and other such stuff is growing. It's the same spot where in years past I've had three different dickcissels.

I was perhaps 30 ft away, approaching the brush pile area, when I noticed activity down close to the ground in a spot where the dead twigs and branches piled in it were not obscured by plant growth. About 3 ft up two cardinals were moving around in full view, both of them with heads cocked looking down at another bird or at least that's what they appeared to be doing.

The other bird was either on the ground or as low as it could get and was disappearing in and out of the tangle. At first I could only see its head but noticed right away that it was a young bird of some sort and it had an eye ring. Its head appeared to be noticeably round, a relative perception on my part, and it was what I would describe as scaly or mottled dark brown and white right straight down across its throat and onto its breast. I immediately eliminated other young birds such as robin, oriole, and towhee, all of which have been frequenting both the mulberry tree and the tartarian honeysuckle bush in the yard.

Its bill was short, squat, and dark and more round at the end than pointed, eliminating robins and orioles. Immature towhees have a much light head color, almost a light tan on the face and down the throat, and no eye ring. Eastern bluebird was my best guess at this point but the bird appeared to be bigger. Frankly at this point I knew what I WASN'T looking at but had no clue as to what I WAS.

Then the bird moved up a bit and I was really stumped. It was about the same size as the cardinals, which shortly flew off from the pile in which they have recently nested, but I didn't recognize the back, wing, or tail patterns. Its upper back was scalloped in a matching but more pronounced pattern like its head but its wings were what took my attention. There were clear and distinct buffy orange/yellow rectangular wing patches on them that stood out clearly. The wing tips of what I perceived to be the secondaries were marked with light or white markings on the end

I really didn't pay any attention to the bird's rump as its wings were folded down over it so I can't really say what it looked like. Its tail, however, was a different matter. It was long, very dark grey, indeed almost light black in color, with an even line of either very light beige or white outer tail feathers on both sides.

At this point, after what I would estimate was about a full 2 minutes of uninterrupted viewing, I still didn't know what I was looking at and felt pretty stupid. The bird continued to move in and out of the brush, appearing to be picking at insects, but I never got a look at its underbelly. Soon it disappeared inside the brush pile and I walked slowly away, perplexed.

It wasn't until a few minutes later, when I got to the bottom of the yard, that a lightning bolt struck me and I found myself running into the house to check one of my bird books. Those buffy wing patches should've clued me in to the possibility of this bird being a Townsend's solitaire but, frankly, that bird hadn't even entered my mind in spite of its bill and patterning. And who, in eastern PA in late July, would be thinking of finding one? Certainly not I; my mind was on hummingbirds.

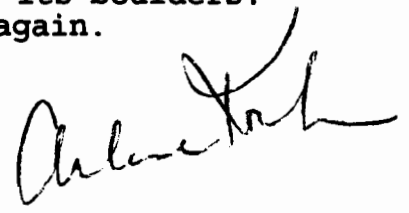
As soon as I checked page 324 of the Geographic Guide I felt panic ensue. I ran back out onto the deck and down onto the lawn, slowing down when I hit the grass because I didn't want to spook this bird away if it was still in the brush pile. But just as I rounded the corner of the pond what I believe was the same bird flew across the lawn and into one of the birch trees in the row of trees right next to the mulberry tree. I backed away because the other side of those trees opens up into open fields and if the bird went out there I probably wouldn't be able to re-find it, at least not without help.

I ran back into the house and called Dave De Reamus and Jason Horn, both excellent birders and available during the day. Dave jumped out of bed and was here in less than 10 minutes. Jason made it down from Emmaus in about 15.

However, in spite of our constantly looking for the next 2 hours, we could never relocate the bird.

I know how unusual this bird is, especially since it wasn't an adult, but everything fit. I've seen adult solitaires in Washington, in Rustler Park in Arizona, and about 20 miles south of here on Steve Farbotnik's property in Revere back in March of 1994. But I wasn't thinking about a solitaire being a thrush and feeding on the ground since all of the individuals I had seen were sitting high up at the tops of trees or branches, flycatcher style.

Unfortunately for me, as of this writing the morning following my sighting, I haven't been seen the bird again and have no outside confirmation of its identity. Perhaps it is somewhere on the high hillside ridge on the other side of the valley. I've seen major hawk migrations up there from my front porch through the years and both turkey and black vultures nest up there among its boulders. But chances are slim that I'll ever see the bird again.



Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round Two

Species: Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*)

Date of Sighting: 21 July 1997 to 21 July 1997

Location: WILLIAMS TOWNSHIP

County: NORTHAMPTON

Observer(s): Arlene Koch

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Arlene Koch

Written Description: Yes

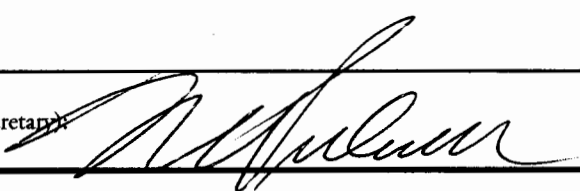
Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
F. Haas				X				
P. Schwalbe			X					
P. Hess				X				
J. McWilliams			X					
T. Floyd								X
D. Couchman								X
R. Ickes			X					
TOTALS			3	2				2
DECISION				X				

Comments: 3/2/2

Signature (Secretary): 

Date: 8/24/00

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*)

Date of Sighting: 21 July 1997 to 21 July 1997

Location: WILLIAMS TWP

County: NORTHAMPTON

Observer(s): Arlene Koch

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Arlene Koch

Written Description: YES

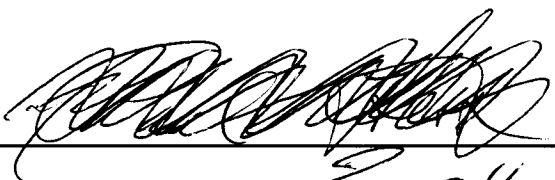
Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
K. Parkes								X
R. Ickes			X					
P. Hess			X					
J. McWilliams			X					
T. Floyd								X
TOTALS			5					2
DECISION			X					

Comments: Abstentions count as highest vote received. However, this is an unusual case. Should we discuss it at the annual meeting before accepting it?




Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Ickes

Date:

4-19-99