

4 June 1996

Nick Pulcinella Apartment 6 201 Elm Ave. Swarthmore, PA

Dear Nick:

I have enclosed a videotape documenting the Dickcissels first reported in late May along PA Route 997 in northwestern Cumberland County. To get to this location from Newville, take Route 641 west for 9 miles. Turn right onto North High Street in Newburg. Follow High Street, which becomes Three Square Hollow Road, for 2.2 miles to a stop sign. Turn right onto PA 997 and go 0.2 miles to a single red brick home with mail box #920 on the top of a hill on the right hand side of the road. The Dickcissels are singing directly across from this house in a hay field on the left hand side of the road. You can also get off the PA Turnpike at Exit 15 and follow PA 997 north until you reach this spot.

The tape shows two different singing males (one out in the field on a weed at the beginning and end of the sequence are presumably the same bird, and one singing from a telephone line along the road) and a female mate of the bird on the telephone wire. Most of it is just of the singing males. A sequence toward the end shows the female hunting for nesting materials, picking up a grass stem, and flying back toward the alfalfa field. In addition to these birds, at least three other male Dickcissels were heard singing out in the fields.

The Dickcissel song identifies the taped males as Dickcissels. However, you probably would not be able to identify them as Dickcissels on the tape without the song. Unfortunately, the tape resolution isn't sufficient to show all the pertinent markings. I did not try to get any closer for fear of spooking them off. I never will be confused with Marlin Perkins or Marty Staufer as a film maker! Thus, I need to describe the birds I saw below.

They had large, thick bills relative to their head size. A decided yellowish eyebrow line ran above their eyes. A dark, blackish V was on their throat (perhaps you can make this out in the early shots of the male on the weed stem) and they had yellowish breasts. The lower belly was white. Their backs and wings were largely a mottled black and brownish-gray. The shoulder of the wing was more rufous than the rest of the bird. The only major difference noted with the female was the lack of a black V on the throat. She also was a little more muted in color than that of the males.

The female was observed collecting nesting materials. While I was their she foraged and picked up at least 3 different grass stem fragments and one very large leaf (nearly half her own size). These she carried into the alfalfa about 15 yards into the field from the edge of PA 997. It was directly in from where the male was singing on the wire. He would occasionally hop down into that area as well. I presume they were a mated pair. I also heard a lot of buzzing from that same area and you will hear me comment on the tape that they may already have hatched a brood. I do not know what birds were making the noise since I did not try to examine the area and scare the Dickcissels. However, it is more likely they were chicks from some other bird making the noise (however, I saw no other birds except American Goldfinches in that specific area of the field, and the buzzing was not from the Goldfinches). It isn't likely the female Dickcissel would be taking nest materials in to an already hatched brood. She should have been carrying food if she did have hatched chicks.

Many people have now seen these birds and I hope you get plenty of good documentation about them. Also, I just received a report from Don Henise that another singing Dickcissel male was observed along Rock Run Road two miles east of Rt. 233 and north of Newville.

I also included some shots of the nesting Yellow-crowned Night Herons in West Fairview Park, Cumberland County. I thought them might be of some interest.

Sincerely yours,

Mark A. McConaughy, Ph.D.

Section of Archaeology

The State Museum of Pennsylvania

Box 1026

Harrisburg, PA 17108-1026

Internet: an535@yfn2.ysu.edu

Work: (717) 783-2665 FAX: 717) 783-4558

Record No.: 795-03-1996

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Dickcissel (Spiza americana)

Date of Sighting: 4 June 1996 to 4 June 1996

Location: HOPEWELL TWP County: CUMBERLAND Observer(s): Mark McConaughy Date of Submission: 1996

Submitted by: Mark McConaughy

Written Description: YES Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE Valeo

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Comments:

Signature (Secretary): FC Hass Date: 8-16-97