

Flying Birds the Way They Often Look: In Silhouette

The field guides that I grew up with concentrated on plumage colors and patterns, using structural characters as “field marks” in only a limited way (e.g., “long legs,” “thin warbler bill,” “huge size,” “forked tail”). Some guides, in fact, used the same bird shape template for all members of a group (as evidenced by Peterson’s earliest wood-warblers), obscuring important species-specific shapes and postures. As I matured as a birder and learned—as we all do—that the combination of vocalizations, actions, postures, and structure were sufficient to identify nearly all individual birds, I often thought that a fun identification challenge would arise if all birds were albinos

(pure white) or silhouetted (appearing pure black). Those musings have now come back to haunt me, as the editor has asked me to participate in this “blackened by Photoshop” bird identification quiz.

When confronted in the field with a bird in silhouette, most sensible birders will consider moving to gain a better angle with respect to the sun, or having a cup of coffee until there’s enough daylight to actually see colors and patterns. But sometimes we don’t have that luxury in the field, and we certainly don’t have it with a photographic silhouette. But take heart—if birds are seen only as poorly as they present themselves in these photos, then it’s perfectly fine not to put names on them; certainly one wouldn’t push such photos as documentation of an unusual record. For the purposes of this photo quiz, we now have an opportunity to explore approaches to field identification that go beyond the traditional “field marks” of color and pattern.

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**Additional
analysis online:
[aba.org/birding/
v42n1p65w1.pdf](http://aba.org/birding/v42n1p65w1.pdf)**

Quiz Photo A

This bird’s long and pointed wings, slender and pointed bill, and obviously notched tail add up pretty quickly to one likely group: the terns (subfamily Sterninae). No storm-petrel, swallow, or pratincole would show the bill shape of this tern, and even the most slender-billed of the gulls wouldn’t match our bird.

Fortunately, most terns can also be ruled out by the combination of features shown by this silhouette. And our task becomes far easier when we consider where we are and what time of year it is. Barring a rarity—and meaning no disrespect to a beautiful and ornithologically fascinating state—it turns out there aren’t a lot of tern possibilities in North Dakota. The heavy-billed Caspian Tern is easily eliminated, and our bird looks too “front heavy,” short-tailed (note the very shallow tail fork), and broad-winged for Common and especially Forster’s terns. Our remaining possibilities are the common and widespread Black Tern and the much more localized Least Tern. Go with the common species? That’s always a good bet, but recall that birder–photographers often selectively photograph less-common birds.

So can we rule out Least Tern? I believe we can, based on a couple of features. The bill of our bird is markedly slender, and yet the wings appear fairly broad and are held straight out, with a straight trailing edge. These characters fit the Black Tern and other “marsh terns” of the genus *Chlidonias*. Least Terns, little power demons, have a sharp and fairly heavy-based bill and fly on narrower wings distinctly angled at the wrist. These differences are reflected in the flight styles—rapid, almost frantic wingbeats by the Least Tern contrasting with a more buoyant and coursing flight shown by the Black Tern. By the way, Pete Dunne’s *Essential Field Guide Companion* wonderfully and characteristically nails all of these points related to structure, flight, and attitude, though I made a

point of not referring to that book until I had formulated my quiz “answers.” So, with a figurative gun to my head, I’ll go ahead and pronounce our quiz bird a **Black Tern**.

What’s a photo quiz “answer” without postscript caveats? First, a single photo of a flying bird can be very misleading, capturing an appearance of structural (flight silhouette) characters the bird, in fact, doesn’t really possess. Could this, then, be some other species of tern captured at an odd angle? Sure. Hence the hesitation records committee members show when presented only with a single photograph for documentation, albeit one usually better lit than this one. Second, Black Tern is one of three *Chlidonias* terns recorded in the ABA Area. Could this be a vagrant White-winged or Whiskered tern? I doubt it, but I couldn’t be sure from the photo alone. Some of the very best bird handbook series—and I single out the monumental *Birds of the Western Palearctic* and *Handbook of Birds of Australia, New Zealand, and Antarctica*—have a very helpful section in the species accounts labeled “Structure,” and the information in these handbooks on the marsh terns provides more detail on relative lengths of the primaries, depth of tail fork, bill shape, etc. Such references are always useful when assessing photographs—while bearing in mind the first caveat.

Quiz Photo B

As that backwoods poem goes, “M R Ducks...O S A R, C M Wangs? (L I B!)” And waterfowl, happily, fit into some fairly distinct categories, more or less congruent with generic allocation. Big, stubby-billed geese and super-long-necked swans don’t come close to matching our birds. Whistling-ducks, with their broad wings, long legs, and drooping necks aren’t in the ballpark—or in North Dakota, for that matter. The ducks in this photo don’t have espe-



Quiz Photo A—Lostwood NWR, North Dakota; 29 May 2009. Photo by © Ken Behrens.

cially long tails, since we can see toes sticking out beyond the rather attenuated rear ends—ruling out, for example, Wood Duck, Ruddy Duck, and Northern Pintail. They lack long thin bills (mergansers) or spatulate bills (Northern Shoveler), and the bills aren’t particularly deep-based—ruling out the various “sea ducks,” including goldeneyes and scoters. So we’ve established that we’re dealing with more “generic” ducks, almost certainly from one of our two largest groupings: the “dabblers” of the genus *Anas* or the divers of the genus *Aythya*.

Let’s confine ourselves to those ducks that would be expected in reasonable abundance in prairie pothole habitat in late spring and early summer—excluding those we’ve already ruled out. As well as most ducks fit a common mold, nearly all species have

unique structural characters involving some combination of bill shape, forehead profile, neck length, tail length, leg length, and wing shape. Our photo appears to show the 11 birds in profile, so perhaps we can have some confidence in assessing some of these characters—though the small image sizes complicate this task. We don’t see the distinctive curled tail feathers of a male Mallard on any of the birds, so, unless the flock is all female, we can perhaps rule out that



Quiz Photo B—Des Lacs NWR, North Dakota; 30 May 2009. Photo by © Ken Behrens.



Quiz Photo C—Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario; 23 April 2009.
Photo by © Ken Behrens.

species. Gadwall and Green-winged Teal usually show a squarish head profile (unlike these birds). Perhaps we can also rule out Canvasback, a bird with a long sloping forehead and bill profile. Wigeon should look a bit longer- (and pointier-) tailed and stubbier-billed than our birds. So what are we left with? Birds that would never be confused if in decent light and if not “frozen” in a still photo: the dabbling Blue-winged (or perhaps the similar Cinnamon) Teal, or a couple of diving ducks such as Redhead or Lesser Scaup. Dabblers are more lightly wing-loaded than divers, with a correspondingly slower wingbeat; divers have more heav-

ily muscled legs and, often, relatively short tails. The photo doesn't help us much here, but we do note that many of the birds show feet extending beyond the tail tip.

I'm sure glad that gun to my head is figurative, because I can't even tell if these are dabbling *Anas* or diving *Aythya* from the one photo. Given the fairly generic bill/forehead shape, the apparent relative length of the legs and tail, and the late spring/early summer status of various duck species according to the Des Lacs refuge checklist, I'll hazard a desperate guess that our birds are **Redheads**, quickly adding that I might not even have the right genus. In “researching” this identification conundrum, I was struck by the near absence of decent published flight photos of even our commonest ducks (particularly *Aythya* ducks). Even a Flickr search didn't yield many useful images—though a search on the keyword “Redhead” sure leads to some interesting results! So you photographers have your work cut out for you.

Quiz Photo C

Unfathomably large numbers of electrons and photons are zinging around in cyberspace carrying arguments about the identity of photographed gulls; entire list-serves thrive on arcane arguments relating to puzzling gulls—hybrids, variants, freaks, or just plain normal birds that nevertheless spark anguish, doubt, and disdain (and only rarely confidence). So imagine my reluctance to hazard any printable



Well? Did he get them right? Go online <aba.org/birding/v42n1p65w1.pdf> to find out.

But before you do that, please do linger with Kimball Garrett's analysis. There is tremendous value to be had from watching the experts—and Kimball is one of the greatest—work their way through the identification process. This quiz is extremely difficult. Several reviewers—they shall remain anonymous, but suffice it to say they are experts, too—called the quiz, in a word, “impossible.” Fine. But the hardest challenges provide the best learning opportunities.

As Kimball notes, bird ID in the field is typically a fair bit easier than what we're dealing with here. A bird in silhouette often comes in for a better view. Or, if it doesn't, we're frequently content to let it go. From the narrow perspective of simply identifying a bird correctly, those are reasonable strategies. But what about the broader goal of learning solid ID skills? That comes from patient consideration of hard, even “impossible,” birds.

Next time you're out in a marsh in the dawn's early light, check out those ducks flying through the mist and the tern disappearing around the bend. Try to put a name on them. Stick with the birds till they come into view. See if you were right. And if you were wrong, great. Learn from the experience. With practice, you'll find yourself picking up on all sorts of subtleties you hadn't considered. Eventually, inevitably perhaps, your hard work will pay dividends: You'll get on a bird that looks somehow, intangibly “different,” you'll stay with the bird till it comes into view, and it will be a Common Pochard or Whiskered Tern or something. Most experts will tell you that such successes come from years of encounters with common birds in “real life” situations like those presented in this quiz—and from careful study and analysis of the sort provided here by Kimball.

— Ted Floyd

reaction to this silhouette of a gull winging over Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, one April. I take that back—I am willing to argue that it is indeed a gull. The combination of long and rather narrow wings (bent at the wrist joints), a moderately short blunt tail, tapered body, fairly short neck, and rather short hook-tipped bill all say “gull.” Yes, it could be a jaeger, but the squared tail—assuming those are toes and not central rectrices projecting in the center—doesn’t look right, nor does the seemingly languid flight profile (insofar as a still image can convey “languidness”).

Let’s go back to status and distribution—always a good idea. Any jaeger in spring around the Great Lakes is noteworthy, and most such birds appear later than April. On the other hand, the Niagara region is famous for its gull concentrations, and even though species diversity drops by late April, there is no shortage of the two commonest species, the Herring Gull and the Ring-billed Gull. The Bonaparte’s Gull, a migrant through the area, lacks the rather blunt bill and long-winged look of our bird. So while I freely admit I don’t know the species of the bird in the photo, common sense suggests that we deal with these

two overwhelmingly likely suspects.

Telling Ring-billed and Herring gulls strictly by flight silhouette should be possible, given a nice profile view. The bill of an “American” Herring Gull is always almost always notably longer and deeper than that of a Ring-billed. Our bird looks relatively short-billed, but the bird is angled toward us so we can’t assess this with confidence. Though a smaller bird than a Herring (and we have no size clues here), Ring-billed Gull has wings that are rather long and pointed relative to body size; the wings, however, are not quite as broad as those of a Herring, especially on the outer (“hand”) part of the wing. Again, this is hard to assess from the photo, though the “feel,” to me, is more toward Ring-billed. A fairly rounded head that doesn’t project too far forward (*if* the photo isn’t too misleading) might also argue for Ring-billed.

So I’ll proudly say I don’t know, and don’t even much care, what kind of gull this is. Given the date and locality, odds are overwhelming that it’s either a Herring or a Ring-billed, and my interpretation of structural characters—all of which might be misleading in the photo—would give a slight nod to **Ring-billed Gull**.

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