

A Closer Look—Nosmo King

BILL MAYNARD, WINGING IT EDITOR

In a mystery novel I recently read, Nick Drake's fictional chief inspector Rai Rehotap, the sleuth chosen by Akhenaten to find his missing Queen Nefertiti, tells his assistant "You have to keep your eyes open. The answer might be right in front of you."

This is good advice for birders working on subtle identification challenges in the field or while honing skills on the photo quizzes in *Birding* or on the ABA website, www.aba.org/photoquiz. Another fictional character, a brilliant and obnoxious medical diagnostician, Dr. House, played by Hugh Laurie in the television series *House M.D.*, uses analytical analysis of his patients' symptoms in a method similar to those used by observant birders when solving problematic bird identifications. House, while trying to discover the etiology of his patients' diseases, systematically eliminates those not fitting the symptoms. For House and for we birders too, the answer is often veiled and often quite different from what we first thought it might be. For House and for many good birders, it is the process that makes diagnosing/birding so interesting.

Francis Crick of DNA double-helix fame said "The very nature of our brains...evolved to guess the most plausible interpretation of the limited evidence available...makes it almost inevitable that, without the discipline of scientific research, we shall often jump to the wrong conclusion." Many birders jump to identification conclusions before making careful observations.

My jump from casual birder to birding student began in the '80s after reading "Empidonax Challenge" by Bret Whitney and Kenn Kaufman, a series of articles in *Birding* about arguably the hardest suite of identification prob-

lems in the ABA Area. The "Empidonax Challenge" refuted my previously held tenant that Empids, when silent, are inseparable in the field. My second birding epiphany occurred when I began to digiscope. While waiting for my targets to assume more photogenic poses, I began looking more closely at feather tracts, leg colors, eyerings, primary projections, tail lengths, and color contrasts that I had never studied before.

I didn't realize it then, but high-school English classes also trained me to become a better observer. We were reading and discussing the concept of utopia one week in a literature class. One homework assignment—read a book about a fictional utopia, and then write an essay discussing the utopian concept. Two of the reading choices were *Erehwon* and *Looking Backwards:2000-1887*. After reading and then taking a closer look, the utopia described in *Erehwon*, if looked at backwards, was **nowhere**. A closer look at "Nosmo King" reveals something you may have already discovered—No Smoking. Whether you are watching birds at your feeders, birding with family and friends, photographing birds, birding at a convention, or participating in a workshop, take this challenge and begin taking a closer look.

A closer look! © Bill Maynard.



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