

## Spring at St. Paul

**F**ield identification of birds demands skills and techniques that are very different from those required for identifying birds in photos. In real life, birders automatically take into account numerous clues that are absent from or minimized in photos. In the field, we can ask the following questions: How does the bird behave and move? What are its general size and shape compared to other species or familiar objects? How do changes in lighting affect the appearance of the bird?

One of the most important clues gleaned automatically in the field is exact knowledge of where you are and what time of year it is. Location and season play a vital role in virtually every bird identification you will ever make. We did not provide you with all the information you would have had in the field, but we did give you an approximate location and time: We told you that the quiz photos are from the high latitudes in late spring or early summer.

As we prepare to look at the quiz photos, keep in mind that birds of the Arctic summer may be unfamiliar in two ways. First, of course, there are the species that simply do not make it farther south to the more heavily populated areas of our continent. Second, keep in mind that certain “familiar” species breed in the Arctic, where they wear decidedly *unfamiliar* plumages. Good luck!

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### Quiz Photo A

Four similar black-and-white birds flying across an empty sky. This photo gives away no clues to habi-

tat, but it does give us an important clue about the habits of the quiz birds. They are flying in a well-organized line. Tucking this behavioral clue into the backs of our minds, let’s examine the structure of our quiz birds. They are stocky, neckless, and short-tailed, and they seem to have short, slender wings relative to their body size. The information we have



Quiz Photo A—late June.

gathered so far places our quiz birds among the alcids. Narrowing the list to the black-and-white alcids, we find that Dovekie, both murrets, Razorbill, and a variety of murrelets all fit this description.

The murrelets can quickly be eliminated, as none show the complete black head and throat of the quiz birds. Dovekie does have a complete black head and throat but can be removed from contention based on a number of conflicting aspects of structure. In particular, the Dovekie is a tiny stub of a bird, whereas the quiz birds are comparatively elongated. Also, the dovekie has a distinctively short bill, unlike the long, pointed bills of the quiz birds.

Left with only the three largest alcids, we can narrow the list to two by removing Razorbill. Razorbill has a long tail, but all four quiz birds show portions of their feet protruding behind their bodies, indicating that their tails are short. Addition-

ally, the sharply pointed bills of these birds could not be matched by even the smallest-billed immature Razorbill.

With only the two murre remaining, let's examine the lead bird. The starkness of the black-and-white plumage is striking; few species show such pure black. The structure of this bird is also telling, though less obvious than the color. The classic description of large alcids as "flying footballs" fits the lead quiz bird perfectly. This is a bulky bird with a large head and a deep, rounded belly. Since Thick-billed Murre is the darkest and bulkiest murre, it is a simple matter of taking a closer look at the bill to clinch the identification by noting the white "tomial stripe," the white stripe that runs along the cutting edge of the bill. The tomial stripe is especially evident during the breeding season, as here. The first bird is an alternate-plumage **Thick-billed Murre**. Since alcids frequently fly in mixed-species flocks, we should examine the rest of the flock. Knowing that the first bird is a Thick-billed gives us a point of reference, simplifying the rest of the process.

While it could still be described as stocky compared to most birds, the second bird looks lanky compared to the Thick-billed Murre in front of it. The head is quite a bit smaller and the body looks flatter, lacking the smoothly curved belly of the first bird. The plumage lacks the punch of the Thick-billed Murre; the overall contrast is comparatively muted. These characteristics match Common Murre well, and a close look at the bill reveals no tomial stripe, so **Common Murre** it is. One odd thing about this Common Murre is the lack of mottling on the flanks. Most Common Murres show this feature, and it is often surprisingly obvious in flight.

With the knowledge that the first two birds are a Thick-billed Murre and a Common Murre, respectively, it is simple to note that the final two birds have the jet-black plumage and heavy build of the first. Both are clearly **Thick-billed Murres**. Notice the rounded belly of the third bird and the curved back of the fourth. All three Thick-billed Murres have wings that are more broadly based than the Common Murre's,

although the difference is not great. These Thick-billed Murres also show less of the body projecting behind the trailing edge of the wings. These three Thick-billed Murres and one Common Murre were photographed by the author on St. Paul Island, Alaska, on 30 June 2008.

Using a bird of known identity as a comparison point to help identify other birds is a useful shortcut when observing mixed flocks. Seawatchers often use this method with mixed flocks of waterbirds. For example, by picking out a distinctive species—for example, a male wigeon in a flock of ducks—the observer can use his or her knowledge of that distinctive species to make determinations about the size, structure, and flight style of other members of the flock. This information will sometimes allow identifications to be made that would be impossible without comparisons.

## Quiz Photo B

This second photo of a single bird silhouetted against a plain sky reveals nothing useful about its habitat or habits. Context is always a key element in bird identification, so let's go back to what we do know about this photo. Recall that we were told that the photo was taken in late May, and that the location is somewhere in the "high latitudes." Let's

create a more specific scenario now: We'll imagine that we're on a boat a mile or so off the coast of Alaska.

Looking up, you spot an odd gull flying toward the boat and watch it for a few seconds before it disappears, lost in the swells. It was certainly a gull and, judging from the angular wings, small head, and slender bill, one of the small- to medium-sized species. Some of the characters noted include the medium-gray mantle color, broad white trailing edge on the secondaries, plain yellow bill, clean white tail, and lack of white mirrors on the outer primaries (P9 and P10).

When you combine the small, plain, yellow bill with the small size, you come up with a very short list of possible species: Black-tailed Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Red-legged Kittiwake, and three mem-



Quiz Photo B—late May.

bers of the Mew Gull complex, known as the Common Gull complex in Europe: Common Gull (*Larus c. canus*), Mew Gull (*L. c. brachyrhynchus*), and Kamchatka Gull (*L. c. kamtschatschensis*).

We can immediately eliminate Black-tailed Gull. Although the bill can be substantially yellow, it always has a black tip. The bill is notably long on this species. Black-tailed Gull is bulkier, too, and it has a strong black tail band. So Black-tailed is out of the question.

Mew Gull appearance and behavior might still be fresh in your mind, as you'd have seen many earlier in the day on this imaginary boat trip. You are certain that the Mew Gulls seen earlier were paler above and showed large mirrors on the outer primaries. Additionally, their wings were longer, and they had longer and slimmer bodies. Other members of the *Larus canus* complex differ from your fly-by bird in similar ways. Common Gull would be mind-bogglingly rare and differs from the quiz bird in all the same ways as Mew Gull. Kamchatka Gull would also be quite rare but far more likely; and although Kamchatka Gull is slightly darker-mantled than Mew Gull, it is still paler than the mystery gull. It is also bulkier and has distinct primary mirrors.

Black-legged Kittiwake is similar to the mystery bird in some aspects, but it has a paler mantle and nearly all-white underwings. Also, it never shows a broad white trailing edge to the wing. Over the past several hours during this imaginary trip, you have watched a number of Black-legged Kittiwakes, and this recent experience allows you to zero in on a few differences in structure and flight style. The mystery bird seemed slightly smaller but stockier than a Black-legged Kittiwake. The wings were shorter and slimmer, with quicker wingbeats. Everything you observed fits an immature Red-legged Kittiwake to perfection, a species that is restricted during the breeding season to the immediate vicinity of its scattered nest colonies in the Bering Sea region.

This second-cycle (first-summer) Red-legged Kittiwake was photographed by the author at St. Paul Island, Alaska, where the species breeds, on 26 May 2008. As noted above, Red-legged Kittiwake is rarely seen except around its breeding grounds. A handful of records do exist for the Pacific states, however, and there are even a few interior records. Thus, Red-legged Kittiwake is a species to keep in mind as a potential vagrant, even if you never make it to Alaska.

## Quiz Photo C

Okay this is an easy one, a medium-sized sandpiper with a reddish back, a black patch trying to come through on the belly, and a droopy bill. Immediately we think of a Dunlin in alternate plumage. But to which race does it belong? That is an interesting question, and one which receives relatively little attention in North America. The two subspecies of Dunlin that are regular over most of North America are *Calidris alpina hudsonia*, found in eastern North America, and *C. a. pacifica* from the West Coast. These two subspecies are similar to one another but are larger, longer-billed, and more richly colored than other subspecies of Dunlin.

Our quiz bird is dull and short-billed for a Dunlin, so it seems that it is a better fit for one of the other subspecies. What about the seldom-discussed *C. a. arcticola*? This subspecies breeds on the north slope of Alaska, and it winters in Japan and Korea. It averages a bit smaller and duller than either *pacifica* or *hudsonia*, more like the races of Dunlin found in the Old World. Speaking of which, can we eliminate the three races of Dunlin that occur in Europe or Greenland, some of which are probably more regular in the



Quiz Photo C—late May.

ABA Area than currently recognized? The race *C. a. arctica* breeds in Greenland and has been rarely documented on the East Coast. Another race found in Greenland, *C. a. schinzii*, has also been reported rarely in eastern North

America, but the documentation has not been adequate for those records to be widely accepted.

The nominate subspecies, *C. a. alpina*, breeding from Scandinavia to Siberia, has not been reported from North America. The races *arctica*, *schinzii*, and *alpina* are smaller than our Dunlins (slightly larger than a Western Sandpiper), with dull reddish backs and short bills. An additional race of Dunlin, *C. a. sakhalina*, is a migrant in western Alaska, breeding in the Russian Far East; it is similar to other Old World races. While several of these subspecies of Dunlin fit the quiz bird better than *hudsonia* or *pacifica*,



**Quiz Photo C, Supplemental Photo—28 June 2008.** St. Paul Island, Alaska; © Cameron Cox.

none is a perfect match. Perhaps it is time to take another look at the quiz bird.

The overall shape of the bird is similar to that of a Dunlin: It has a plump body with a proportionally small head. The bill is shorter and straighter than most Dunlins, but it could fit a male, particularly one of an Old World subspecies. Some things just seem a bit off, though. The eye seems enormous, whereas Dunlin tends to have small eyes. The left wing of the bird is arranged oddly, but even so the primary projection seems longer and the legs a bit thinner than is typical for Dunlin. The face pattern of this bird is atypical for Dunlin, even allowing for the significant variation within alternate-plumage Dunlin. The large dusky spot on the auriculars is pronounced, and the whole face seems dark and smudgy rather than pale and finely streaked as on Dunlin. Finally, the broad white line on the exposed left wing can only mean that the quiz bird has

largely white secondaries, whereas the white on a Dunlin's upperwing is restricted to the tips of the greater coverts. So if it isn't a Dunlin, then what is it?

The preceding combination of field marks can be found in only one taxon: the Rock Sandpipers breeding on the Bering Sea islands of the Pribilofs, St. Matthew, and Hall. These birds represent the nominate subspecies of Rock Sandpiper, *Calidris p. ptilocnemis*, which is larger and paler than the three other subspecies. This subspecies also differs from other races of Rock Sandpiper by having almost entirely white secondaries and outer tail feathers, which would account for the extensive white visible on the left wing of the quiz bird. The supplemental photo (this page) shows the full extent of the white wing-stripe in *ptilocnemis*. The broad wing-stripe and clean white underwing make for an impressive show when males perform their wing-quivering flight display.

Like the quiz bird, the Rock Sandpiper in the supplemental photo has a Dunlin-like shape and basic color scheme, but it differs from Dunlin in having a shorter, straighter bill, and shorter legs. Coloration of the belly varies greatly in *ptilocnemis*. Some show an extensive black belly patch, at times approaching Dunlin; others, like the individual in the supplement photo, show reduced belly patches.

This "Pribilofs" Rock Sandpiper was photographed by the author on 23 June 2008 at St. Paul Island. Visitors to St. Paul are often surprised

by how closely the initial impression of a *ptilocnemis* Rock Sandpiper can mimic a Dunlin in alternate plumage. The differences, however, become obvious on closer inspection. Given that the whole population breeds on Bering Sea islands and spends the winter in Cook Inlet, south of Anchorage, it is not likely to be seen away from Alaska. However, there is a record for the Washington state coast, so a "Pribilofs" Rock Sandpiper is something to watch for on the Pacific Coast.

On the Atlantic Coast, finding an *arctica* or *schinzii* Dunlin would be more likely, although a sighting would still be exceptional. While most birders hope to find an Old World shorebird like a stint or Curlew Sandpiper, few are looking for other races of Dunlin. With our current knowledge, one of these Greenland-breeding Dunlin subspecies is about as rare on the East Coast as Broad-billed Sandpiper. Perhaps these Dunlins really are that unusual, but unless more people look for them, we will never know.