

Headless Birds

Bird identification is a process, not a result. It is a question, not a definitive answer. Reflect for a moment on a recent experience in the field, and you'll see what we mean. A jaeger zips around the stern, or a sparrow flushes from the weeds. *Prior to the moment of observation*, you can't possibly have known what the bird was. At the initial moment of observation, the playing field is completely level for every birder on your boat trip or big day.

Let's say it's a tricky ID—a juvenile jaeger at a distance perhaps. Okay, that's one for the two experts on the boat. One guy says, "It's barrel-chested and large-billed; look at the white primary shafts on the otherwise uniform upperwings." The other expert says, "Looks kinda svelte to me—in profile, anyhow—with two-toned wings and limited white in the primary shafts." The bird doesn't come with a pre-affixed label that says "PARASITIC."

Same thing with a briefly glimpsed sparrow. The field trip leader says, "Long-tailed, brown-rumped, gray-naped." Her co-leader agrees that it is long-tailed, but states that it is gray-rumped and

brown-naped. This sparrow, like the jaeger, doesn't carry a banner that proclaims "BREWER'S."

Folks, this is reality.

We don't know beforehand what the bird is. Not even the experts are clairvoyant. And yet *Birding* photo quizzes, for nearly 30 years, *have not reflected that reality*. Instead, the person who wrote the quiz answers was told

beforehand what the quiz birds were. In many instances, that person actually photographed the quiz birds.

Continuing with our new approach to photo quizzes, unveiled in the previous issue of *Birding* (September 2009 issue, pp. 58–61), our quizmasters do not know, at least initially, what they're looking at. Last issue, you may recall, three excel-

lent birders could not agree on the identification of Quiz Photo C. That's life. That's reality. That's honest birding.

In this issue, our quizmasters are Saraiya Ruano and Paul Hess. Ruano is a sophomore at Colorado College and a rising star in field ornithology. Hess is a retired newspaper editor and—even though he would violently demur at the characterization—one of the most-respected field ornithologists in Pennsylvania. They're different people, they're different kinds of experts, and it goes without saying that they apply different methods to on-the-spot bird identification.

For Quiz Photo C, note how Hess goes straight to the color of the lesser coverts, whereas Ruano initially questions whether that field mark is even there. For Quiz Photo B, both quizmasters apply process-of-elimination toward the identification of the bird, but they do so with different emphases: Ruano emphasizes body structure, whereas Hess tends more toward plumage. And what about Quiz Photo A? Both agree on the identification, but note that they are inconsistent about one of the feather tracts on the wing. (Ruano says tertials, Hess says primaries.)

In the phony, bowdlerized world of earlier *Birding* photo quizzes, an editor or technical reviewer would have airbrushed Hess's understandable error. (Actually, Paul himself would have caught it. Few birders scrutinize their own writing as carefully as he does.) But we're leaving it in here. Again: This is real life.

One final comment. Two of our technical reviewers disapproved of a strategy that was applied by both Hess and Ruano. Both quizmasters used the recent literature (including the internet) to verify Quiz Photo A. No fair, you say? Then you haven't been paying attention. One of us (Ted) was in the field recently, and his companion heard a call note of a bird that was—shall we say?—"interesting." What to do? Well, the guy whipped out his pocket gizmo, got the call online, played it,

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and out popped the “real” bird.

Next time you see a tricky vagrant in Death Valley, do the right thing. Go online while the bird is still under observation, download the relevant S&D literature, and identify the bird.

— Ted Floyd and Cameron Cox

Quiz Photo A

The first observation I would make about this bird concerns behavior. It is sitting on the ground in what appears to be a grassy field. Looks like a golf course. This bird appears slender, and the beak is long and pointed. I am an advocate of trusting one’s instinct; even if it’s wrong, it may eventually get me to the correct answer. Larks, birds often found perching on the ground in fields, were the first “answer” that popped into my head upon seeing this photo. Some plumages of larks—for example, juvenile Horned Larks—are drab, and many birders do mistake juvenile Horned Larks for similar grassland species like pipits.

But note the absurdly large tertials on this bird. They completely cover the primaries. On a perched or standing Horned Lark, in contrast, the primaries show prominently. This trait alone led me directly to pipits. Sprague’s, Red-throated, and American Pipits have all been seen in California. The sparse streaking on the breast eliminates Red-throated, which has bold streaking extending down to the flanks. The heavy streaking on the back eliminates American Pipit. That leaves **Sprague’s Pipit** for consideration. Sprague’s Pipits winter southeast of California in north-central Mexico, so their occurrence in Death Valley is not totally surprising. This photo suggests Sprague’s Pipit, a bird which was in fact seen in Death Valley, California, in October 1997. Just Google it. —SR

Streaked birds are sometimes a challenge to identify, especially if they are juvenile sparrows or finches, because they may look quite different from adults. Here, we can ignore those pesky emberizids and fringillids—including the extensively streaked female longspurs—because the bill shape and disproportionately huge legs tell us it is something else. Write off Sage Thrasher because neither adults nor juveniles have such heavily streaked upperparts. Rule



Quiz Photo A—Death Valley, Inyo County, California; October 1997.

out a juvenile meadowlark because this bird’s crown striping and facial pattern are totally wrong. The year alone dismisses California’s only Sky Lark, because the last occurrence of the species in the state was in the winter of 1984–1985.

That leaves us with a more likely suspect: a pipit. But which species? Neither American nor Red-throated is so conspicuously streaked on the back and crown. That leaves Sprague’s, which is a good candidate in every respect. Its extremely long primaries and short tail, heavy streaking on the back and crown, prominent white eye ring and postocular streak, and tremendously oversized legs all say **Sprague’s Pipit**. Assuming that fall is the most likely season to find a Sprague’s at a grassy spot in the California desert, the date and place seem appropriate, too. —PH

Quiz Photo B

Sparrows have always presented a challenge to me, but I find it easier if I group the various characteristics of each genus in my mind and begin there. If I never nail down my ID down to species, at least I will have gotten somewhere by narrowing it down to genus. Overall, the quiz bird is chunky—at least relatively speaking...compared to, say, a Chipping Sparrow. Also, it is relatively long-tailed and short-winged. These characters suggest the genus *Aimophila*. Despite the raised feathers, I see a hint of rusty coloring on the bird’s crown. And I might be hallucinating, but I think I see a touch of rufous on the lesser coverts. Rufous-



Quiz Photo B—Catalina State Park, Pima County, Arizona; December 2002.

winged Sparrow fits the description like a glove, and, furthermore, its range barely extends into the U.S. through Pima County and the Tucson area of Arizona. —SR

We can probably agree that this is a sparrow, and we can begin to narrow the field at the level of its genus. The long tail eliminates *Ammodramus* species. Almost all *Melospiza* sparrows are either streaked on the sides or, in Swamp Sparrow's case, are dark reddish and gray. Savannah Sparrow has streaked underparts. Lark Sparrow has long wings. The big *Zonotrichia* species can't easily be dismissed, but they should show a pale central crown stripe; here, the central crown looks dark. *Spizella* species may be plausible, but they strike me as too dainty for this bird. For the best chance of success, I turn to *Aimophila* sparrows, all relatively short-winged, long-tailed, and with plain underparts.

One *Aimophila* species comes readily to mind. Look at that bit of bright rufous on the lesser wing coverts. Dickcissel (which is not a sparrow) may have a rufous shoulder, but that long-distance migrant has very long wings. Vesper Sparrow may show rufous lesser coverts but has streaked underparts. This leaves **Rufous-winged Sparrow**. The dark-centered median and greater coverts, contrasting with the paler, heavily streaked back, are good for Rufous-winged too, as is what we can see of the dark reddish crown. Also appropriate for this species is the location: a park where, I believe, Rufous-winged is a year-round resident. —PH

Quiz Photo C

I developed some creative ideas in my head about this bird before arriving at a reasonable answer. (Epiphany at midnight.) First impressions lead me to chickadees, then vireos. (After all, this is a small, gray bird.) I initially dismissed the chestnut shoulder patch as a fluke—a bare patch on the wing or some kind of research tag. This is, however, a crucial field mark on this bird. If the head were visible, it would be a lemony yellow, and I'd immediately say **Verdin**. Instead, the head is conveniently hidden by a feeder, which is in fact a clue itself. Nectar is a large part of the Verdin's diet, and Verdins frequently feed from hummingbird feeders. Although the shoulder patch is often hidden, it stands out clearly in this photo and suggests Verdin. The range extends well into southern California and into Kern County, which supports this answer. —SR

I quickly jumped to a conclusion based on a single field mark and an important bit of context. It is usually wise, though, to consider a snap-judgment made from a single photograph of a headless bird as a hypothesis to be tested.

We see a small bird with medium-gray upperparts and plain grayish-white underparts—something that could be said of many species in many avian families. The lack of any faint tan or olive wash should eliminate titmice. Ab-



Quiz Photo C—Inyokern, Kern County, California; April 2003.

sence of color on the flanks should eliminate most chickadees. Lack of even a faint wing bar or two should eliminate flycatchers. Otherwise, I don't see much to judge beyond impressions of relative wing and tail proportion. The wings are extremely short, with hardly any primary extension beyond the tertials, and the primary tips do not reach the outer ends of the uppertail or the undertail coverts. The tail seems neither conspicuously long nor conspicuously short—in other words, medium in length, if that is meaningful. In general, combinations of those characters might work to eliminate vireos, Bushtit, gnatcatchers, and Tennessee and Lucy's Warblers. But the impressions are vague and unconvincing.

Let's end the pondering. One conspicuous character points straight to an identification. It is the dark red patch on the lesser coverts. Unless this is a scrap of blood on a wound, it fits only one gray bird: an adult **Verdin**. Contrast between the dusky-edged greater coverts and the white-edged secondaries and tertials is a subtle hint in Verdin's favor as well. And the important bit of context? Verdins love hummingbird feeders.

—PH