Thoughts from the Photographer: The V Word

Shorebirds are great. They are conspicuous and easy to see. Most are easily identified after a bit of practice—but some can be challenging. The point of these photos is to caution against the idea of the “silver bullet” approach to any type of bird ID—that is, using a single field mark and not looking any further. Juvenile dowitches: Check the tertials. Juvenile golden-plovers: How many visible primary tips? Smaller curlews: cinnamon-toned bold patterning above means a Bristle-thighed, right? But as Michael O’Brien notes in his analysis of the January photo quiz, you should always be aware of “the V word”—Variation.

Quiz Photo A

The quizmasters ably tackled the dowitcher, and the exact date and location—20 August in central California—would have been another big clue. That’s very early or too early for a juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher in California. Juveniles begin arriving in the last week of August, and they are uncommon before September. For comparison, a supplemental photo shows a Long-billed Dowitcher with similar tertial markings—at the same site and on the typical date of 17 September.

It is helpful to reread the commentaries with this supplemental photo in mind. Note also the molt of new, gray, first-winter (formative) scapulars; these are usually among the first feathers to be molted in the preformative molt. The upperwing coverts and tertials are molted much later, after the scapulars. Lee mistakenly suggests that some upperwing coverts of the quiz bird could be first-winter, but that should not be the case when the bird still has juvenile scapulars. On the golden-plover (Quiz Photo B), O’Brien perceptively and correctly notes the newly molted scapulars, which helps with identifying the bird to species. Knowledge of molt sequence can be very helpful!

Back to the dowitcher. I heard the bird call many times over the course of the hour or so I was photographing it and other Short-billed Dowitches.
Quiz Photo B
The curlews—yes, the Whimbrel is a curlew—are interesting. Among the thousands of Whimbrels I have seen, the boldly marked bird stands out as different. I did not hear that bird call, and one curlew researcher has suggested to me that it could be a Whimbrel × Bristle-thighed Curlew hybrid. The relatively thick bill, the relatively stocky shape, and bold and bright pattern are somewhat suggestive of Bristle-thighed. The overall impression, though, is of an “exaggerated” Whimbrel, as noted by Lee and O’Brien, and that seems most likely.

Then again, Bristle-thighed Curlew is rather variable. Here’s another point in favor of Whimbrel. On the bird in flight, the rump was heavily barred, as shown in the supplemental photo. That’s typical of Whimbrel; Bristle-thighed Curlew has a plain cinnamon rump. So this bird is probably a Whimbrel—but who knows for sure? There’s nothing wrong with saying it’s unknown.

Supplemental Photo B.
Stinson Beach, California;
20 May 2002.
Photo by © Steve N. G. Howell.

Photo Quiz B.
Quiz Photo C
Check out the supplemental photo of the same juvenile Pacific Golden-Plover as the one in the photo quiz. It shows the three primary tips characteristic of Pacific Golden-Plover. The bird also looks typical of a juvenile Pacific in every other way. I'm not sure how the tertials were rearranged in the quiz photo to reveal four tips. Regardless, and as implied by O'Brien, this feature is variable. Otherwise, the bird's structure and bright gold tones—and voice (not available here)—were typical of Pacific Golden-Plover. I don't know if the scapular molt is diagnostic (I doubt it), but, if so, it is probably more typical of Pacific.

Supplemental Photo C.
Abbots Lagoon, California; 15 September 2004.
Photo by © Steve N. G. Howell.