

# Green, Gray, Brown...

Maia Paddock • Carlisle, Pennsylvania • [mozartfinch@comcast.net](mailto:mozartfinch@comcast.net)  
 Jon L. Dunn • Bishop, California • [cerwa@earthlink.net](mailto:cerwa@earthlink.net)



As you will soon see, quizmasters Maia Paddock and Jon L. Dunn are not in full agreement about the quiz photos. Yet in their divergent solutions to this photo quiz, they highlight some key challenges for the modern student of bird identification. Go on-line [aba.org/birding/v43n3p60w1.pdf](http://aba.org/birding/v43n3p60w1.pdf) for additional thoughts on the matter—and for the provisionally “correct” answers to this photo quiz. —*Editor*

## Quiz Bird A

This photo shows a hummingbird with a light–gray–green head and back. The wings are darker looking, but from this angle, it is hard to tell and not important. There also appear to be white spots on the tip of the tail. That mark is good for more than one species of hummingbird, so most likely those white spots will not help in our quest for a good identification. The size of the bird is hard to tell because there is only a twig in the photo, but even the twig looks fairly big in comparison to this bird. The dark, practically straight bill is also good to note, but it may not be super-important. The most distinctive feature of this particular bird is the solid, unmarked white below, extending from the throat to the vent.

Let’s now flip through the field guide and eliminate hummingbird species not found in Colorado. According to my guides, we’re left with only four hummingbirds. Only two of these hummers, the Broad-tailed and the Black-chinned, are found in Colorado outside of migration. However, the photo was taken in late September, which means that two migratory species—Calliope and Rufous in Colorado—are possi-

ble. Given these choices, there is only one logical conclusion for the identification of this bird.

The stark white underparts point to a female **Black-chinned Hummingbird**. Even without first narrowing our choices only to Colorado species, the female Black-chinned is one of very few North American hummers with a clean white front, lacking mottling or spots. Additionally, the gray-green back color matches the female Black-chinned exactly. —*MP*



**Quiz Bird A. Colorado’s Front Range region, late September.**  
 Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

Here we have a hummingbird with green upperparts and essentially white underparts. Thus, it clearly is not one of the *Selasphorus* hummingbirds. (In the Front Range, Rufous and especially Broad-tailed are possible *Selasphorus* hummers.) I thought briefly about a *Calypte* hummingbird, as both Anna's and Costa's are casual in Colorado. The quiz bird is much too white and clean for an Anna's, and it looks too dark a shade of green for Costa's; also, it lacks pale coloring coming up the sides of the neck toward the eye, as on Costa's. The shape of the primaries is not visible, and that's an additional clue for separating *Calypte* from what this bird is, an *Archilochus* hummingbird, either Ruby-throated or Black-chinned.

Which one is it? Not being able to see the shape of the primaries is a hindrance in knowing which species of *Archilochus* it is. Also problematic is the bill, which does not look particularly short (Ruby-throated) or long (Black-chinned); so that character is equivocal on this bird. Two features I can discern are a rich, green crown and a blackish triangular lore patch. These two features favor Ruby-throated. The latter character was discovered and explained to the California Bird Records Committee by Marshall Iliff in his studies at feeders in western Mexico, where both species occur in the winter. I hope I have interpreted Iliff's remarks correctly.

So I lean toward **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** on this one. Maybe the late September date at this location is a slight additional factor; the date is very late for a Black-chinned. Ruby-throated is rare in Colorado, so I would try to see the shape of the outer primary and see how the bird is maneuvering its tail. Does it twitch its tail just a bit (Ruby-throated), or does it twitch its tail actively (Black-chinned)? But beware of that distinction: Both species twitch the tail on approach to a feeder or flower. —JLD

## Quiz Bird B

Here we have an all-gray vireo. The “spectacled” pattern of the face is the first feature that stands out to me, but quite a few vireos display this pattern. There is perhaps a very small hint of a yellowish tinge on the belly, but not enough to use it as tipping point in the identification. The



**Quiz Bird B. Colorado's Front Range region, mid-May.** Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

back is a much darker gray than the underparts, and there are hints of two wing-bars. The feet and legs are dark. This description and the Colorado location narrow the options down to either Plumbeous or Cassin's vireo. However, the bird lacks the strong yellow tint to parts of its belly that a Cassin's should have, and mid-May is a little late for a Cassin's Vireo to be migrating through Colorado. Therefore, this bird is a **Plumbeous Vireo**. —MP

This is clearly a vireo with a thick, hooked bill. The bold spectacles certainly suggest one of the “Solitary” vireos right off, and I can see two wing bars as well. A Gray Vireo would lack the whitish supraloral line of the quiz bird, and would show only one faint greater secondary covert bar. It would also have a longer tail and would lack the white shown on the outer edge of the inner web of the outer tail feathers. It has previously been stated but is worth repeating that Gray Vireos are essentially never seen as migrants. And Gray Vireos do not breed in Colorado's Front Range.

This is a **Plumbeous Vireo**. The lack of yellow on the sides and flanks rules out Cassin's. Even the dullest Cassin's show some yellow on the sides and flanks. The presence of outlined white on the tail also fits both Blue-headed and Plumbeous, but not Cassin's. A Blue-headed would of course be even brighter below than Cassin's. Besides, this is the Front Range and that's where Plumbeous Vireos breed and are to be expected. —JLD



Quiz Bird C. Colorado's Front Range region, Mid-December. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

## Quiz Bird C

This wren is fairly nondescript. It has a bar above its eye, but that bar lacks a strong or stark color difference from the rest of the face. Below, the bird is brown from the throat down to the vent. The bird is darker above than below; toward the rear of the bird, though, the difference is not that great. The whole bird is diffusely mottled except for a little-clearer patch on the throat. From this angle, the tail appears to be short for a wren. The tail shows barring, and it comes to a clean, rounded tip. The feet and legs are a pale pinkish. The little bit of a bill that can be seen is small and pointed. This bird looks fairly small, even for a wren.

Without looking at a range map, birds that come to mind for me are Carolina Wren, House Wren, Winter Wren, and Marsh Wren. However, this bird does not have very strong white on its throat or above its eye, so that rules out Carolina Wren. The overall color is vaguely right for Marsh Wren, but that is a more boldly patterned bird. Additionally, a snow covered forest floor is completely the wrong habitat for a Marsh Wren. With only House and Winter wrens left, House is eliminated by its lack of eye markings. This leaves only **Winter Wren**. The forest habitat is typical for a Winter Wren. I could also have approached this bird by eliminating the wrens not found in Colorado in the win-

ter; that also would have gotten me to the right answer. —MP

This is a wren, and with its stubby tail and rich coloration overall, it certainly appears to be one of the winter wrens, recently split into two species: Winter Wren in the east and Pacific Wren in the Pacific region. There has been a lot of whining about the English name of the latter, for after all, the species is not found *in* the Pacific Ocean. Don't charter a boat and look among the shearwaters for a Pacific Wren. But the range of the Pacific Wren *does* frame the Pacific Ocean from the Pacific Northwest all the way out the entire length of the Aleutians; and based on genetics,

apparently even the birds from the Commander Islands in the Russian Far East are Pacific Wrens. Recordings of contact notes at xeno-canto.org indicate a close similarity with birds all the way down the Asian side to Taiwan. Those birds' contact notes sound basically the same as the notes of Pacific Wrens from western North America, and not like the eastern Winter Wren. I suspect that future genetic work will show a close relationship between the northeast Asian wrens and the Pacific Wren. A colleague of mine, Kimball Garrett, has suggested, perhaps in jest, the English name of Pacific-rim Wren, and I think he may be onto something.

But I've digressed. Assuming our quiz bird is one of the winter wrens, we have to deal with both species, as both could occur in the Front Range. Pacific Wren is likely a rare breeder in the higher Rockies of Colorado, and Winter Wrens occur in fall and winter, particularly in the eastern part of the state. The two have distinctly different songs, and their contact notes are especially different. But the bird in this photo cannot be heard. The underparts, especially the throat and breast aren't a rich cinnamon-buff, so I think the bird is not of the nominate *pacificus* subspecies of Pacific Wren, the one likely to occur in Colorado. (The subspecies *salebrosus*—recognized by some authorities, but not by others—is very similar.) So **my tentative guess is Winter Wren**, a scarce visitor from Canada's boreal forest zone to the east and north. —JLD