

Black Birds



Additional analysis of, and speculation regarding, these three photos can be found on the ABA website: tinyurl.com/3mzg9e4

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A picture is worth ten thousand words, it is said. Perhaps. But a picture—even a good one, as in these fine photos by Bill Schmoker—cannot replicate the experience of being in the field with a real bird. In all three of our quiz images, various key aspects of the birds' morphology and behavior are impossible to evaluate: vocalizations, of course; the bird's overall size; its manner of flight; and so forth. —*Editor*

Quiz Bird A

This is clearly an adult male grackle by virtue of its shiny “black” definitive plumage and long, blackbird-shaped bill. The bill is long for a blackbird, and that, combined with the shiny uniform purplish plumage *and deep brown eyes*, screams **Boat-tailed Grackle**—especially to someone who lives in the southeast.

The only odd thing is that it doesn't appear to have a super-long tail. The tail feathers look fresh, and the tail suggests a keeled shape. Maybe its short length is an optical illusion, or perhaps the tail is blown off to its side by the wind, or maybe it actually *is short*. A grackle typically molts all of its tail in a short amount of time during the complete molt following breeding, and it is not uncommon to see adults with bobtails of various lengths while all tail feathers grow in simultaneously—and males nonetheless sometimes still sing despite their shortcomings. —*DLD*

See a large black bird with a long, conical bill and an oddly shaped, keeled tail. It's a grackle. Not only that, it's a grackle with a dark eye. **Boat-tailed Grackle** is the only grackle species with a dark eye, but this

mark is useful only in the far southwestern portion of its range, along the north-central coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Boat-tails farther east have yellow eyes.

Just to be sure, it's good to look at other marks. For starters: the shape of the head. The Great-tailed Grackle has a very flat head, whereas the Boat-tail's is rounded or dome-shaped, as with the quiz bird. Another mark is the bird's overall sheen. In the field, Boat-tailed often has a teal-col-



Quiz Bird A. Gulf Coast region, April. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

ored sheen over the body, whereas Great-tailed tends toward violet or indigo. In other words: on the green side of blue for Boat-tailed and on the purple side of blue for Great-tailed. This distinction is hard to make out in “flat” light, however—as appears to be the situation in the quiz photo. —MLPR

The photographer identified this bird as a Boat-tailed Grackle, presumably relying in part on those very cues—for example, the shape of the tail and the bird’s overall sheen—that our quiz contestants consider to be a bit problematic from just the photo itself. And the most obvious thing of all: The bird appears to be screeching its head off. But it is silent in this photo. —Editor



Quiz Bird B. Atlantic Seaboard region, May. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

Quiz Bird B

This black-feathered bird is a corvid by virtue of the feathering extending outward on the culmen. There’s nothing to hint at the bird’s overall size, and I have to admit that, on first glance, it struck me as “raven big.” The feathering on the bill does not extend *that* far out, however, and the bird doesn’t have long, lanceolate feathers on the neck. Those marks point to a crow instead of a raven.

It’s a tossup as to which species of crow, except that we know it was photographed on the east coast. So that narrows it down to American or Fish. I see and hear both species all the time. I’ll go with **Fish Crow**. That’s a guess based on the bird’s overall impression: It’s long-winged, with a sort of wedge-shaped tail, and a smallish, hooked bill. When I see crows in Louisiana, I assess basic features and hazard an ID of silent birds. If a bird then vocalizes and identifies itself, sometimes I’m right, but other times not.

Something else: The bird is sitting on a rock, so maybe it’s on a shoreline, suggesting Fish Crow by habitat. That could be an important clue in some places, but not where I live in southern Louisiana. Here, American Crows typically occur at Grand Isle on the southeast coast, whereas Fish Crows dominate on the southwest coast in Cameron Parish.

I’m not sure if there is anything really definitive to identify this bird for sure. Did the photographer confirm the

bird’s identification by hearing it? I’d like to know if I guessed right! —DLD

This is a large black bird with a stout bill. A member of the genus *Corvus* for sure. The bill appears on the large side, and it’s got some pretty bristly feathers over the base of the culmen. The throat seems shaggy, and the tail seems long. These features point toward a raven. An idea of the wing length would be helpful in eliminating a crow, but it is hard to determine in this photo. Still, I can almost convince myself that I see the outermost primary on the right wing (against the tail) extending quite far. On the Atlantic seaboard, the only species of raven one expects is Common Raven.

We have a few problems, however. The bill isn’t as long as I’d like for Common Raven, but I suspect the head is turned at an odd angle, foreshortening the bill. Some Chihuahuan Ravens are long-distance migrants. They usually have longer nasal bristles than this bird, but, without seeing the base of this bird’s neck feathers (white in Chihuahuan, gray in Common), I’m not completely comfortable eliminating that species. And, truthfully, I’m not sure this isn’t a crow—the relatively long-tailed Fish Crow in particular. In life, of course, we’d have the benefit of seeing how big this bird actually is. And the possibility of hearing it. Both would



Quiz Bird C. Pacific Coast region, September. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

make this bird much easier to identify. In the meantime, it's instructive to reflect on how a single still photo highlights similarities between two species—**Common Raven or Fish Crow**—that we would not ordinarily confuse in the field. Real-life context in the field matters! —MLPR

Yep, Fish Crow on this one. With a good look in real life, it's hard to imagine confusing Fish Crow with Common Raven. After all, Common Raven is more than three times the mass of Fish Crow. But as both contestants noted, it's quite difficult to assess size from photos like this one. By the way, I showed this photo to several other folks, and they all guessed a raven. —Editor

Quiz Bird C

This bird isn't wholly black—but it is quite dark. So let's start off with anatomy. The bird is gull-like in appearance, but the bill has a sheath, thus making it a jaeger. I can't see how many paler primary shafts are visible. And the bird's missing its central rectrices. On top of that, it's a dark morph, and that's not helpful for aging the bird, although I would say it is probably an adult or near-adult based on the yellowish hackles I can make out on the side of the neck. Identification of jaegers is not trivial. Whether it's a quick look in

the field or a single quiz photo, a bird's actual size and proportions can be difficult to assess. There is also pronounced sexual dimorphism to consider, and the three species overlap in size.

But that's not going to stop me from evaluating what I see in this single image! This individual seems somewhat hefty and big billed (but not so much as to make it a skua), and it is gull-like in proportions with rather broad wings. So chalk those characters up to **Pomarine Jaeger**. Are there any truly definitive characters that can be seen in this photo? I don't think so.—DLD

We have a stout-billed aerialist waterbird here: a jaeger or gull.

I'm tempted to call this very dark bird with a two-toned bill a jaeger, but it has absolutely nothing in the way of pale feather edgings, which I'd expect on a juvenile jaeger. An adult, meanwhile, should have a contrasting dark cap and some semblance of tail streamers. Furthermore, it lacks a bold white flash at the base of the primaries from above. There is a hint of white on the underside of the left wing, but, still, it's not the bold white flash one would expect on a jaeger or skua. There's only one species of gull in North America that's ever this dark, and some **Heermann's Gulls** show the jaeger-like white markings much more prominently than the young bird we see here. —MLPR

Donna's batting a thousand. This is indeed a **Pomarine Jaeger**. She noticed something that, honestly, I had not. The bird shows a bill sheath, plainly obvious if you blow the image up a fair bit; click on tinyurl.com/3mzg9e4 to see the details of bill structure on this bird. Now, in fairness to our readers—and to Michael and me!—that mark cannot be discerned from the reproduction on p. 80 in the May 2011 *Birding*. I'll take the hit on this one: I should have looked more carefully at the final page proofs. But there's a silver lining in this editorial cloud: This photo is a great segue, I dare say, to the important and thought-provoking feature article, beginning on p. 28 of this issue, on the perils of identifying birds from single photographs. —Editor