

(Bill) Size Matters

independent analyses by

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Thanks to Sarah Toner and Alex Hale for their commendably efficient photo quiz answers. They're agreed on Quiz Birds A and B, and photographer Bill Schmoker confirms that their IDs are correct. Toner and Hale got Quiz Bird C to the same genus, *Numenius*. Cool word, by the way: It means "new moon," a reference to bill shape in the genus. But we can't see the bills on these birds. Quiz Bird C is indeed a Whimbrel. Supporting features, noted by Hale, include the relatively strong stripes on the face and the "cold" tones overall. —Editor

Quiz Bird A

This bird is fairly chunky, with heavy, clean barring clear across the back feathers. The tail is tough to make out, but it appears to be barred as well. What is visible of the front of the bird is white, with slightly dingy sides. The legs appear to be fairly long and grayish, but the mud makes it hard to tell for sure.

Although it seems that this could be one of many shorebirds, the back barring is a wonderful clue. Except for Willet, Long-billed Curlew, and Marbled Godwit, all other shorebirds have different back patterns. A worn breeding Willet would have dirtier and more disorganized barring, narrowing this bird down to a Marbled Godwit or a Long-billed Curlew. Separating Long-billed Curlew from Marbled Godwit without bill shape is tricky, especially with most of the traditional field marks hidden. Like both Long-billed Curlew and Marbled Godwit, this bird shows black tips on the outer primaries, and we cannot tell whether the other feathers are barred or not. There appears to be a tiny patch of dark gray dry leg just where the tibia meets the leg feathers, suggesting Marbled Godwit. Although this does look like skin, it could possibly be caked-on mud, so it shouldn't be the only field mark used to identify this bird. A



Quiz Bird A. Palo Alto, California; October. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

few more tentative clues pointing to Marbled Godwit are the short body and the impressive depth to which the head is stuck in mud. (How on earth would a Long-billed Curlew get that deep? I never doubt a bird's potential, but it seems improbable.) Finally, the primary projection, although hard to judge, seems to be longer than the tail, also indicating **Marbled Godwit**. —ST

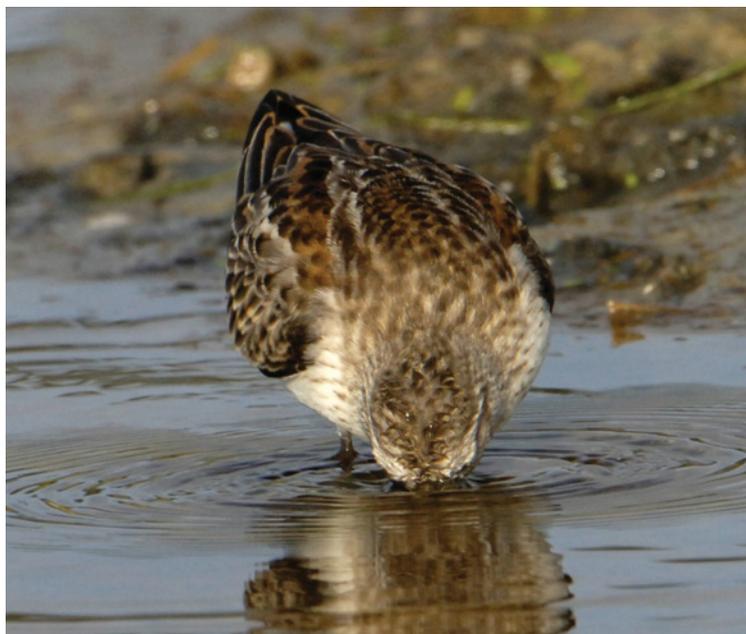
This is clearly one of the larger shorebirds, and the patterning and overall coloration suggest a godwit or a curlew. The relatively heavy barring on the back, combined with the unmarked, lighter underparts, rule out three of the four godwit species, leaving us with Marbled, which is also the most likely based on range and season. We can also rule out Whimbrel because of the lack of barring on the flanks and the buffier over-

all coloration—which is not, in and of itself, a good feature for identification because it often depends on the lighting, but, combined with other features, it can be helpful. Note also the difference in shape: A Whimbrel's body would appear slimmer, and the primaries would fall short of the tail. So, based on this, the bird is either a Marbled Godwit or a Long-billed Curlew. The three main distinctions between these two species—discounting the bill shape—are leg color, primary length, and the overall bulk of the bird. The legs appear to be dark, as they would be on a Marbled Godwit, but they are also mostly caked in mud, so this is an unreliable identification feature. The primaries clearly extend beyond the tip of the tail, and the bird is quite bulky with a relatively short neck. Therefore, this rules out Long-billed Curlew, which would have a longer neck, a slimmer bill, and shorter primaries, leaving us with a first-winter or adult non-breeding **Marbled Godwit**. —AH

Quiz Bird B

Another shorebird missing a bill?! This bird appears to have short legs, a round head, a fairly chunky body, and some rufous on the scapulars. The wings and back have a scaled pattern, and the head and nape are covered in fine streaks. The breast is partially obscured, but what we can see of it looks white and streaked.

The shape indicates a *Calidris* sandpiper. Sanderling and Red



Quiz Bird B. Monterey, California; September. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

Knot are both eliminated by shape and coloration; they would be lighter, with fewer streaks. The strong supercilium and the lack of a rufous crown exclude Dunlin. This narrows it down to the peeps. Baird's and Pectoral never show this much rufous, and even bright Semipalmateds wouldn't have scapulars this dark. Juvenile White-rumped Sandpipers can show this much rufous, but they are ruled out by this bird's chunky shape, apparently short wingtips, and dingy nape streaks. The sliver of leg that is showing appears blackish, ruling out Least. The rich rufous upperparts, blackish legs, and crisp feathers leave one option: a juvenile **Western Sandpiper**. —ST

This is the most challenging of the three photographs because it reveals very little of the bird's shape. The bill and head shape are, of course, obscured, and so are the shape of the torso and the length of the wings compared to the tail. The primaries appear to project beyond the tail tip, but the angle of the shot is such that this cannot be discerned clearly. Therefore, the main details we have to work with are the patterning and coloration, both of which are variable from bird to bird and difficult in the case of shorebirds.

In the field, size would be very helpful in telling whether or not this bird is a "peep," but without it we cannot rule out a larger shorebird such as a Sanderling or a Dunlin. The rufous in the bird suggests either Sanderling or Western Sandpiper. However, the supercilium is pale but still streaked, with darker and more heavily streaked auriculars. This, along with the lack of contrast on the back and the general "neatness" of the back pattern lead me to rule out Sanderling, although this is my least confident identification. I think this bird is a juvenile **Western Sandpiper** because of the faint streaking on the breast (which is mostly obscured), the clear distinction between the mantle and the wing, the clear outline of each individual scapular, the faint braces, the paler supercilium, the rufous in both the mantle and the upper scapulars, and the additional traces of rufous in the crown. Because of the angle of the photograph, however, I am unable to confidently state that the primary length seems correct for Western, even though this would usually be one of my first identification features. —AH

Quiz Bird C

Great, we're back to square one—or is it Quiz Bird A? Fortunately, this bird in profile is much easier to identify; it's very elongated, the primary projection is shorter than the tail, and the legs are a light bluish-gray.

The visible part of the bill appears entirely pink, suggesting Marbled Godwit, but the bottom is angled towards us, matching the pink lower mandible of a **Long-billed Curlew** and confirming my identification. This bird provides a nice comparison of the difference of shape between Marbled Godwit and Long-billed Curlew. —ST

This bird is the easiest of the three to identify because the head and overall shape of the bird are clearly visible. The bold eye and crown stripes point immediately toward Whimbrel, as does the apparent “cool” color scheme as opposed to the buffier Long-billed Curlew and Marbled Godwit. Although Marbled Godwits can also show a striped head, they appear either completely unstreaked or very faintly streaked on the breast in non-breeding plumage (note that the photo was taken in December). Also, a godwit’s wings are clearly longer than those of a Whimbrel, with the primaries projecting beyond the tip of the tail. A Long-billed Curlew’s primaries are about equal with



Quiz Bird C. Elkhorn Slough, California; December. Photo by © Bill Schmoker..

the tail, and that species has a relatively long neck and small head for a shorebird. Our quiz bird, however, has a shorter neck and larger head. Therefore, I believe that it is a **Whimbrel**. —AH

