Photo Quiz

Bob Curry

You are birding in an open area in fall on the lookout for birds of brushy habitats and of adjacent lawn and gravel substrates. You are identifying sparrows, pipits and maybe a few late warblers of more open habitats when onto the fence pops the bird shown in the photo. At this point, you have not seen its behaviour, nor have you seen it in flight. It seems to have a rather fine bill, so thoughts of potential warblers momentarily pass through your head. Is it a Tennessee Warbler? No, the bill is not nearly so fine and downcurved as in that species and the legs are too long and robust. The bird is also too large and chunky for a *Vermivora*. How about female Black-throated Blue? Again, that species has a more slender bill and a much less bold superciliary stripe. The wing pattern is wrong also. Black-throated Blue Warbler has a white patch at the edge of the folded primaries but is otherwise plain-winged, whereas this bird has patterned lesser and median upperwing coverts. But what of the really bizarre; could it be a Swainson's Warbler? The overall pattern and shading seems correct and Swainson's is a large warbler which

fits this bird better than the first two; but again, the supercilium is not as strong as in this bird, there is no dark below the eye and the wings are entirely plain and unmarked. Moreover, a Swainson's Warbler on a fence in fall in Ontario is an extremely improbable scenario.

The trouble with these quiz analyses is that the mind works astoundingly fast processing perceptions into conceptions at lightning speed. Written explanations are stolid by comparison and add an artificial rigidity to bird identification. So I ask readers to imagine that at least the first half of this analysis would take place in, at most, two or three seconds. Moreover, some of the analysis explicated here would be done almost at a subliminal level and we would state later that we instantly recognized the bird for what it was, forgetting that years of experience and learning have allowed our minds to do this sifting at amazing speed.

So where were we? The bird is plain enough that we should consider vireos. Although Philadelphia and Warbling Vireos have plain plumage, they are eliminated, as is so often the case in bird identification, by shape and proportions. Vireos have proportionately thicker bills which are slightly hooked at the tip. They are more large-headed and bull-necked, with shorter, more slender legs. Moreover, they also do not have patterned upperwing coverts.

Another rarity which would fly up to a fence and which has dark through and below the eye is an immature Vermilion Flycatcher. However, it perches in a more erect stance, has short weak legs, has some streaking on the breast, is a darker shade on the belly and undertail, and has darker wings and tail.

So the erect posture; plump, deep breast and belly; straight, narrow and fine-tipped bill; and sturdy legs all point to a thrush. And, of these, only bluebirds have clear unpatterned underparts. But they have an eyering rather than a white supercilium, have no dark shadow under the eye, and possess plainer lesser and median upper wing coverts.

Our bird is, then, a **Northern Wheatear**, an identification which, as discussed earlier, many readers would have arrived at almost instantly. If we were next to see it fly, the identification would be clinched as the bold white rump and distinctive tail pattern virtually assaulted our eyes. Chaucer referred to this common English bird as the "white-arse", hence the common name today.

This is a member of a large Palearctic genus of which only this species has colonized North America, making inroads from both Siberia into Alaska and the Yukon in the Northwest, and from Greenland into Canada's eastern Arctic. In Ontario, however, the Northern Wheatear is a rare bird

indeed. There was one occurrence along the Hudson Bay coastline during the Breeding Bird Atlas project, but it is essentially during fall migration that the Greenland Wheatear, as the subspecies which migrates to Africa is known, is found in southeastern Canada and northeastern United States. Most, if not all, such records are of first basic birds, a few of which, annually, migrate SSE from their birthplaces in the northeastern Arctic instead of due east to Europe before heading south. These immatures lack the bold contrasting black wings and black face mask of their parents but, as has been discussed, are readily identified. The eastern subspecies, *Oenanthe o. leucorhoa*, is more strongly buffy on the breast, which can be seen in all our birds, and measures larger, which cannot be determined in the field. In some years there are no reports, but it is virtually annual somewhere in southern Ontario.

They have been found in clearings and communities hacked out of the boreal forest which act as oases for open country birds such as this, but I suggest checking large open lawn areas adjacent to any of the eastern Great Lakes or large rivers. And, although fall dates range from the end of August until mid-October, concentrate your efforts in the period 23-26 September as there is a distinct peak in frequency of occurrence in the East during this short time frame. The quiz bird was photographed by Glenn Coady at Oshawa, *Durham*, on 15 October 1995.

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