

Photo Quiz

by
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Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds* 10 (2): **Red Phalarope**.

This quiz bird is one that for many years was poorly dealt with in most field guides, thereby causing a lot of unnecessary grief for shorebird fans.

With any shorebird identification, it's best to determine the age of the bird first. This individual can be identified as a young of the year by several features. The brown streaked juvenile back feathers (most obvious near the base of the neck) are being replaced by grey first-winter feathers. Also, the crown and area around the eye and ear are coloured in a diffuse brown, again indicative of a young bird. These latter features are usually lost within a few months of fledging.

So, now that we have determined it is a juvenile bird, we must find features that establish this bird as a Red Phalarope. There are many species of shorebirds found in Ontario, but only three phalaropes --the Wilson's, Red-necked (formerly Northern), and Red. One feature that I find noticeable about all the phalaropes is their long body length, a product of having a long rear end which gives them a kind of "boat-like" look, apparent in this photo. The neck appears a bit longer than many species of shorebirds and, in proportion, the head also looks a bit smaller than it should. The fact that the bird is up to its belly in water is not of much use since all shorebirds can wade. However, if you see a shorebird actually swimming for

prolonged periods, then a phalarope is almost a certainty.

Wilson's Phalarope can be ruled out fairly easily on both structure and plumage. Wilson's have very long, fine bills, probably appearing half again as long as the bird in this photo. Juvenile Wilson's also have more uniform, scaled backs, not streaked and blotched like this photo. The real trick here is to separate this bird from a Red-necked Phalarope, and this is the hardest age to do it with. In plumage characteristics, juveniles of both species look fairly similar so the old standby of bill shape and size remains the best point to focus on. The bill of this bird appears somewhat unremarkable in proportion, with the tip being fairly fine and the base somewhat enlarged. Red-necked Phalarope bills are similar in length but always appear much finer in overall length, much the same as a Wilson's does. If this bird were a Red-necked, the thicker base of the bill would not be readily noticed.

Many books, particularly older guides, refer to Red Phalaropes as having a yellow base to the bill but this is not present on juveniles, nor many winter adults. Another helpful feature for separating the two most similar phalaropes is their call, which is frequently given when they take flight. Red-necks have a crisp "chit-chit", while Red's have a much higher pitched and softer "chit", not too unlike a White-rumped Sandpiper's call.

This juvenile Red Phalarope was
photographed in September at
Ottawa, by Brian Morin.

Our next quiz bird is suitably
nondescript!



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