

## *Photo Quiz*

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Our photo quiz bird is clearly a long-legged, long-billed shorebird of the sandpiper family. It is quite robust but not enough so to be a godwit of any species all of which, in addition, have a bill which is thicker at the base, slightly upturned and two-toned with a light basal half contrasting with a darker distal half. Willet is a taller, stouter bird with a shorter, stronger bill and has but a rudimentary light eyebrow stripe unlike the broad whitish supercilium in the subject bird. Greater Yellowlegs has a moderately long bill which usually appears slightly upturned. Moreover, the yellowlegs is quite slender, again lacks the bold supercilium and has a pattern of light speckling on the upperparts in all plumages. The much shorter-legged Common Snipe which occasionally occurs on open mudflats is a highly patterned bird with creamy stripes on the crown, face and back as well as bold barring on the sides of the breast and flanks. Stilt Sandpiper has a long bill but it is thinner than on our bird and it is slightly downcurved. The entire bird is also more finely proportioned and, as the name implies, has proportionately longer legs

Which brings us to the dowitchers. Both of the dowitcher species which occur in Ontario have long bills. The appellation Short-billed Dowitcher must seem particularly ridiculous to the birder seeing this species for the first time! So we should be especially cautious about using bill length as a method for distinguishing Long-billed from Short-billed Dowitcher. Nonetheless, bill length sometimes can be useful

along with other characters in identifying the much less frequent and therefore more desirable Long-billed. Female shorebirds are larger than their male counterparts but there is considerable overlap between the sexes. Female Short-billed Dowitchers have bills as long as male Long-billed but female Long-billed may have bills which are twice the head length (from base of bill to back of head). Measuring the photo bird reveals a bill that is exactly twice the head length which suggests that we give the entire bird closer scrutiny.

In addition to bill proportions, there are a few even more subtle structural features which can be weighed into the argument, although species identification should never be determined by these alone. The Long-billed, a shorter-distance migrant, has proportionately shorter wings. The primary tips on some birds may fall just short of the tail tip whereas in Short-billed these same feathers may extend very slightly beyond the tail. On our bird, they just about reach the tail tip. Told you it wasn't much of a feature! On the other hand, the bird appears quite gangly which fits the situation for female Long-billed Dowitcher which has longer legs.

In shorebird identification, it is important to age the bird, as this can be very critical in determining the species. The overall lightness of underparts with a minimum of spotting and barring eliminates an alternate (breeding) plumage dowitcher. In full basic (winter) plumage, both dowitchers are plain grey and

unpatterned and consequently very difficult to identify to species unless the diagnostic calls are heard. Fortunately, this bird has a patterned dorsum created by light margins to the feathers of the back and scapulars and is a juvenile. Now we have something to work with.

Basic and juvenile Long-billed Dowitchers have a darker, more well-defined breast which contrasts with the lighter belly. This cowled appearance can be the very first indication of a potential Long-billed when the bird is seen at a distance. Actually, on close examination, this bird has rather more, albeit faint, spotting on the lower breast than one expects in Long-billed so we are still not sure what we've got. However, at this close approach, the key feather tracts can be examined. Note the four rows of scapulars lying between the back and the wing coverts. These are extensively dark-centred with fairly narrow light margins. Except at their very base, these feathers do not have internal light markings. This is consistent with Long-billed and unlike Short-billed, which has an overall brighter appearance created by internal yellow-gold markings on the scapulars.

Even easier to study are the three or four long tertials which lie atop the tail and the three or four secondary coverts which droop down across the base of the tertials. All these feathers are plain and dark with very narrow light margins. This clinches the identification as **Long-billed Dowitcher**. Short-billed Dowitcher has extensive squiggly gold markings across and in the middle of these feathers. Indeed, they are often described as tiger-striped feathers.

Look very closely at the tail. A couple or three tail feathers are just visible below the tertials and folded primary tips. On these, the black barring is at least as wide as the white bars. On Short-billed, the tail appears lighter as the white bars are broader than the dark.

Although some of these features are subjective and could be misconstrued, the scapulars and tertials of juvenile dowitchers are absolutely diagnostic and, in the photo bird, the other characteristics are consistent with the identification of a juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher. The photographs were taken at Ottawa Beach by Michael Runtz on 2 October 1985.

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