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December 2006 Quiz

Glenn Coady

This time we are presented with a plump, ground-dwelling bird with a short, stout bill and short legs. It is probably safe to assume that birders of all experience levels would instinctively associate this bird's chicken-like appearance with it belonging to one of the species of upland game birds in the order Galliformes.

There are ten species from this order on the Ontario bird checklist, nine from the family Phasianidae (partridges, pheasants, grouse and turkeys), namely Gray Partridge, Ring-necked Pheasant, Ruffed Grouse, Spruce Grouse, Willow Ptarmigan, Rock Ptarmigan, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Greater Prairie-Chicken and Wild Turkey; and one from the family Odontophoridae (New World quail), the Northern Bobwhite.

We can quickly eliminate the Northern Bobwhite from consideration since our quiz bird has a fairly non-descript head pattern and both sexes of the Northern Bobwhite show a striking head pattern, with a strong contrast provided by a very noticeably paler supercilium and throat that lack any streaking.

Similarly, just about anyone who has ever eaten Thanksgiving dinner would not be inclined to mistake our quiz bird for a Wild

Turkey. It is simply a much bigger and more uniformly darker plumaged bird with a much longer neck than this quiz bird.

A Ring-necked Pheasant of either sex should show an extremely long tail, but we are unable to see the tail on this bird. Nonetheless, it lacks the bright red facial skin and wide white neck-ring of a male pheasant as well as the general pale buff ground colour and the combination of long neck and relatively small head which impart a "pin-headed" appearance to the female pheasant.

Our quiz bird does not show the obvious rufous flank barring nor the generally gray ventral coloration of either sex of the introduced Gray Partridge. It certainly also lacks the orange face and chestnut brown belly patch of a male Gray Partridge.

Thus we have ruled out three of the nine species of Ontario birds from the family Phasianidae: one species from the sub-family Meleagridinae (Wild Turkey); and two from the sub-family Phasianinae (Ring-necked Pheasant and Gray Partridge). Our quiz bird is therefore one of the six Ontario grouse species belonging to the sub-family Tetraoninae.

The grouse most easily eliminated are the Willow Ptarmigan and

Rock Ptarmigan. Adults of both ptarmigan species are extensively white in the non-breeding season, quite unlike our quiz bird. Male Willow Ptarmigan in the breeding season show a solidly rufous head and neck and have extensively unmarked white bellies and undertail. Male Rock Ptarmigan in the breeding season have a head, neck and back that are a variegated mixture of black, brown and white barring. They also retain an extensively white belly and undertail in the breeding season. Additionally, adult ptarmigan in all seasons also usually show some of their white flight feathers on the folded wing, but this is not useful for our quiz bird photograph as we are unable to see the flight feathers. Juveniles of both

Ontario ptarmigan species are more uniformly dark than this bird.

Likewise, the Spruce Grouse is not a good fit either. Adult male Spruce Grouse have black throats and breasts with large white spots on the belly and very distinctive comet-shaped streaking on the flanks, completely unlike our quiz bird. Female Spruce Grouse have breasts that are extensively linearly barred with black, gold and white, inconsistent with the scalloped breast pattern seen on this bird. They also show extensive pointed white spots on their flanks. Both sexes of Spruce Grouse also show small whitish lines on the head running laterally back from both above and below the eye, which are not apparent on this bird.

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Although our bird has a short crested appearance slightly similar to a Ruffed Grouse, that species is easily ruled out by the lack of very long and bold dark barring on the flanks. Ruffed Grouse also do not have a scalloped breast pattern like this bird. Our quiz bird is also simply not a good colour match for either the gray or rufous morphs of the Ruffed Grouse.

Having ruled out all the other Ontario Galliformes, we have thus

narrowed the possibility down to one of the two Ontario species of the genus *Tympanuchus*, the Sharp-tailed Grouse and the Greater Prairie-Chicken.

Quite apart from the fact that it has been extirpated from Ontario for over forty years, we can easily exclude the Greater Prairie-Chicken. It would show a completely and evenly barred body all over, a pale throat, and elongated neck pinnae should be visible.

Our quiz bird is, therefore, a **Sharp-tailed Grouse**, and although we are unable to see its pale, centrally-pointed tail in this photograph, we are able to see many of the key field marks that reliably identify it: a slight crest, a scalloped breast pattern, large white spots in the black and gold wing coverts, and perhaps easiest to discern, a pale belly and flanks with obvious dark chevrons.

I photographed this adult female Sharp-tailed Grouse at the Gore Bay airport lek on Manitoulin Island on 23 April 2006. My thanks to Steve Hall and the many other Friends of Misery Bay for the dedication they put forward in sharing their knowledge of this lek, to the benefit of so many Ontario birders.

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