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FOR THIS PHOTO QUIZ, we are dealing with a small passerine that we see fairly well. It is probably fair to say that most birders, on first glance, would quickly realize they were looking at either a wood-warbler or similar appearing vireo.

We are afforded a nice look at the bill, and it is clear that this bird lacks the thick, hooked tip to the bill that we would expect to see if this bird was a vireo. Having quickly ruled out any of the vireos, we therefore know we are dealing with one of the 44 species of wood-warblers on the Ontario checklist.

Looking at the leaves in the field of view, their advanced state of growth suggests this is likely not a spring migrant. The amount of leaf damage from insects point to this being a summer photo, suggesting our bird is either a summer resident or a fall migrant. The fairly drab, yellow-olive plumage suggests it is one of a number of our similarly plumaged fall migrants that bring beginning birders despair as a suite of birds disdainfully regarded as “confusing fall warblers”.

The bird is clearly not a Yellow-breasted Chat, lacking its large size, heavy and thick bill and long tail. Its lack of prominent streaking on the breast, belly or flanks, rules out Black-and-white Warbler, Northern Water-

thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush and Ovenbird.

Two very important considerations when identifying warblers are very well seen in the view that we have here: colour and pattern of the undertail and undertail coverts; and extent of tail projection beyond the undertail coverts. This will be very useful in narrowing down our list of candidates. Note that our quiz bird has a white belly, and undertail coverts, and an undertail that is centrally white with darker corners. This easily observed combination of features allows us to eliminate a large number of Ontario wood-warblers from further consideration, including: those that have yellow undertail coverts (Common Yellowthroat, Wilson’s Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Mourning Warbler, MacGillivray’s Warbler, Connecticut Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Virginia’s Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Palm Warbler and Prairie Warbler); those that have a uniformly dark, unpatterned undertail beyond the coverts (Canada Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Virginia’s Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Mourning Warbler, MacGillivray’s Warbler, Connecticut Warbler, Wilson’s Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler and Swainson’s Warbler); those that have patterned under-

tail coverts (Painted Redstart); those with strikingly patterned bi-coloured tails (Magnolia Warbler and American Redstart); those with a strong contrast between the colour of the belly and flanks versus the undertail coverts (Canada Warbler, Blue-winged Warbler and Prothonotary Warbler); and those with exceptionally short tails (Cerulean Warbler).

Our bird also lacks the strong facial pattern found in all plumages of Golden-winged Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Townsend's Warbler and Blackburnian Warbler. Its head is not a bright enough yellow for any plumage of Hermit Warbler. It has very obvious white wing-bars, which rules out

Black-throated Blue Warbler and Tennessee Warbler. Our bird does not have any strong contrast between the throat and the rest of the head, ruling out both Yellow-rumped Warbler and Kirtland's Warbler in all plumages. Its lack of a yellow mandible rules out Northern Parula. It lacks the grayish side to the head, white eye-ring and yellowish wing-bars of Chestnut-sided Warbler. Unlike this bird, Cape May Warbler shows extensive ventral streaking in all plumages. In summary, all other Ontario warblers are quite easily ruled out except for a group of three abundant warbler species often mistaken for each other in fall: Pine Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler and Black-poll Warbler. Pine Warbler is easily

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separated from the other two by its unstreaked upperparts, as all plumages of both Blackpoll Warbler and Bay-breasted Warbler show streaked backs. Unfortunately, we have an inadequate view of the back to make this distinction useful. Fortunately, we have an exceptional view of another useful character for analysis. Pine Warbler has short undertail coverts and very long tail projection beyond the undertail coverts, whereas both Bay-breasted Warbler and Blackpoll Warbler have very long undertail coverts that leave them both with very short tail projection beyond the coverts. Our quiz bird clearly shows the latter pattern, allowing us to rule out Pine Warbler.

We are thus left with a choice between Blackpoll Warbler and Bay-breasted Warbler, one of the most common fall warbler misidentification problems for Ontario observers, particularly with very similar first fall females. Most Bay-breasted Warblers in fall show a distinctive bay-coloured flank patch, making separation from Blackpoll Warbler simple. However, many first fall Bay-breasted Warblers lack any bay colour in the flanks, thus leaving that feature unreliable for separating the two species. There are a few features that we can see here which provide more reliable separation of the two species. Bay-breasted Warbler usually shows a distinct cream or yellow wash to the undertail coverts, whereas Blackpoll Warbler usually

shows immaculate white undertail coverts (occasionally, some show a very light yellow wash). Bay-breasted Warblers show dark legs, whereas fall Blackpoll Warblers have legs that are yellow posteriorly, with decidedly yellowish soles to the feet. Bay-breasted Warbler usually lacks streaking about the breast, whereas all plumages of Blackpoll Warbler tend to show some (often blurry) streaking at the sides of the breast. Bay-breasted Warbler often lacks, or has a very indistinct, trans-ocular line, whereas Blackpoll Warbler in all plumages has a very distinct trans-ocular line.

In our photo, we can clearly see that our quiz bird has immaculate white undertail coverts, has some blurry dark streaking about the breast, has pale yellowish posterior colour up the back of the legs, and shows brighter yellow soles to the feet. It shows quite a distinct trans-ocular line, particularly behind the eye. All of these features are consistently more in keeping with the identification of this bird as a **Blackpoll Warbler**.

This Blackpoll Warbler was photographed on 9 September 2006 at Point Pelee National Park, by Tadao (Ted) Shimba.

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