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Photo Quiz

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Here, we are presented with a colorful passerine as it is moving out from among the shadows, but not yet quite out into full open sunlight—an observation setting very familiar and typical for Ontario field birders. I think it is fair to say that even fairly novice observers would recognize immediately that this small, compact, short-tailed, brightly colored passerine with contrasting wing bars, chest and flank streaking, an eye ring, and a short, pointed bill is a wood-warbler. More experienced observers would have already deduced from the general shape of the bird and the combination of contrasting plumage characters such as wing bars, tail markings, flank and chest streaking, and patterning around the eye, that this bird likely belongs in the genus *Dendroica*. However, let's not get ahead of ourselves. A review of this bird's field marks should quickly narrow down the list of potential candidates from the 44 species of wood-warblers on the Ontario checklist.

This bird has a fairly stout, pointed bill. However, it is not as finely or sharply pointed as in any of the wood-warblers of the genus *Vermivora*, and all of these can be ruled out immediately on this basis alone. It shows a general plumage pattern that is largely blue-grey dorsally and mostly bright yellow ventrally, except for obviously whitish undertail coverts. Lack of any yellow in the undertail coverts immediately rules out a wide variety of wood-warblers including all those in the

genus *Oporornis*: Hooded Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow Warbler and Palm Warbler, none of which are likely to be mistaken for this bird anyway. Lack of any contrasting greenish tone to the back of the quiz bird effectively rules out the Northern Parula, of which the female is marginally similar in this general pattern of appearance. There is only a small set of the remaining wood-warblers that exhibit to *any degree* this general blue-grey dorsal/yellow and white ventral pattern in any age or plumage class (most other *Dendroica* warblers and all other wood-warbler genera being thus eliminated). This list would include: Canada Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Kirtland's Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler and Grace's Warbler (which has not yet occurred in Ontario).

Our quiz bird has a complete, thin white eye ring and the head is otherwise unmarked, being almost uniformly blue-grey from above the level of the gape to the crown, nape, supercilium and lores (with perhaps some fine darker flecking in the crown). We would expect both the Yellow-throated Warbler and Grace's Warbler to demonstrate a strongly contrasting supercilium in any plumage, and thus we can eliminate them as candidates also. Neither of these species would be as extensively yellow beneath as this bird either, with the yellow extending beyond its legs, ending at the whitish undertail coverts.

Further examining our quiz bird, we see that it has a virtually unmarked bright yellow chin and throat area, and a bright yellow breast, liberally spotted with fine black streaks which extend onto the sides and to the rear flanks, where the streaks progressively become much heavier, longer, darker and more coalesced. Although the Canada Warbler is superficially similar in general appearance to this bird, it never exhibits such extensive streaking on the flanks, and it lacks both the prominent white wings bars and the black streaking on the back which are visible on our quiz bird.

So we are left with a choice of either Yellow-rumped Warbler, Kirtland's Warbler or Magnolia Warbler for this quiz bird. Obviously, with the quiz bird demonstrating a bright yellow throat, we need only concern ourselves with plumages of "Audubon's Warbler" (*Dendroica coronata auduboni* subspecies group), from populations of the western subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler, which is a very rare migrant in Ontario.

With another look at the quiz bird, we note that its wings are held up just enough to expose a reasonable portion of the rump, and that portion that we can see is clearly blue-grey and concolorous with the crown, back, wings and tail. In any plumage of both the "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler or the Magnolia Warbler, we would expect to see a contrasting yellow rump,

and thus both of these species safely can be discounted, leaving us with the conclusion that this is a **Kirtland's Warbler**. Note that the relatively long tail (for a wood-warbler) on this bird, the largest of the *Dendroica* warblers, also appears consistent with that identification. The lack of any contrasting black markings in the lores or anterior cheek allows us to safely assign the sex of this bird as a female.

One aspect of this bird's field identification, not possible to ascertain from a still photograph, would have been most helpful in reaching a diagnostic identification. In the field, this bird was observed to habitually pump its tail with a quick downward jerk and a slower, smoother lift back up. This habit is very typical for Kirtland's Warbler and although Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Canada Warbler all can exhibit some significant amount of tail-twitching (mostly side-twitching) while foraging, they do not exhibit the *habitual* tail pumping in the manner described above. Such habitual tail pumping in a species with this general appearance should draw intense scrutiny.

You will note I have not discussed the age of this bird. First spring females cannot, under even optimal field conditions, be reliably separated from adult females. However, if I had to hazard a guess, I would suspect this bird was an adult. I base this suspicion on the combination of its blue-grey head, nape and back (from field notes) with little

brown tones, the bold black streaking on the back, the large size of the streaking on its sides, the blue-grey primaries and rectrices (from field notes) which showed little in the way of both brown tones and feather wear, and the bright white (rather than buffy) edges to the rear scapulars. Interesting to note is that this bird tends to show a little more white to the sides than most female Kirtland's Warblers. This female Kirtland's Warbler was discovered by Denys Gardiner and later photographed by Glenn Coady at Point Pelee National Park on 21 May 1995.

I would caution that observers should not underestimate the definite potential for those that are inexperienced or careless to misidentify some Magnolia Warblers (particularly first spring females) and some "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warblers (particularly spring adult females and fall/winter adult males) as being female Kirtland's Warblers.

Some first spring female (and even some fall male) Magnolia Warblers are mistaken for female Kirtland's Warblers because they exhibit very similar plain blue-grey heads with fine white eye-rings and little or no contrasting supercilium, and limited black breast and flank streaking that can quite effectively mimic the pattern on female

Kirtland's Warbler. However, even the most similar first spring Magnolia Warblers will show the following tell-tale clues that should keep them from being misidentified: a greenish wash to the dark-streaked back; a sharply contrasting yellow rump (although sometimes difficult to see); bolder white wing bars; and a strongly linearly demarcated undertail pattern with the basal half white and the distal half black. In Ontario, I would say first spring female Magnolia Warblers are the likeliest birds to be misidentified as Kirtland's Warbler.

Similarly, some spring adult female and fall/winter male "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warblers can be mistaken for Kirtland's Warbler, even though the two are very unlikely to occur in the same geographic areas with any regularity. This is primarily because of the very similar head and throat appearance of the two, as well as the similarly streaked back. Observed carefully, though, "Audubon's Warbler" should be easily separated in any plumage based on its contrasting yellow rump, its generally more prominent wing bars, its often obvious yellow crown patch, and its lack of yellow over a large portion of its breast, belly and flanks.

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