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Photo Quiz

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Figure 1



- .clearer, brighter image
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April 2006 Quiz

Glenn Coady

For this quiz, we are faced with a small, brown, streaked passerine—a familiar identification challenge often referred to by birders as a “little brown job”. The combination of such a small passerine with a small, conical bill and a short, notched tail limits the range of possibilities to the sparrows, buntings and finches. This bird, however, is not a good match for any adult sparrow, bunting or finch to be found in Ontario. The reason for this is a simple one—this is a fledged juvenile bird. We can age this bird correctly as a juvenile based on a series of traits visible in Figure 1. Notice that the primaries, secondaries, tertials, and greater coverts all seem uniformly fresh, and that the outer primaries are still growing. We can see also that the contour feathers of the body appear to be more loosely textured, which is typical of juvenal contour feathers, lending a somewhat tattered or disheveled appearance despite the freshness of the plumage. Note that the rectrices are very tapered and pointed, more typical of a juvenile bird than an adult.

One of the most striking things we notice about this bird is the very weak contrast of the head markings. Although many of our juvenile sparrows are heavily streaked ventrally like this bird, they all general-

ly exhibit more contrasting head patterns (particularly dark eye lines). Also, they tend to have longer bills than our quiz bird, which has a very stubby bill indeed. Bill size can often continue to grow for about a month after juvenile birds fledge, so it is best to be careful about placing too much emphasis solely on bill size in juvenile birds.

The juvenile buntings (Indigo, Painted, Varied, Lazuli) are not so crisply streaked ventrally, have much plainer backs, and all show a more noticeably curved culmen than this quiz bird.

Our bird is therefore one of the juvenile finches. The overall coloration, streaked plumage and petite bill size obviously rule out species like Brambling, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Pine Grosbeak and Evening Grosbeak. Juvenile Pine Siskins have much longer and more pointed bills than this bird, and they also tend to have a more overall yellowish cast to their plumage. Although both species of juvenile crossbill can look generally similar to our bird, and some are late to develop fully-crossed bills, they would definitely have pronounced curvature to the culmen, so we can eliminate them from further consideration as well. Juvenile American Goldfinch and Lesser Goldfinch are unstreaked

Figure 2



ventrally and are much more yellow-olive in colour, and are thus easily ruled out.

Juvenile House Finch, Purple Finch and Cassin's Finch all have longer bills than this bird, and they lack so pronounced a wing-bar on the rear edge of the greater coverts. Both House Finch and Purple Finch have a more strongly curved culmen, as well.

Thus, we have narrowed the choice down to one of the two redpolls. Note the cinnamon wash across the streaking of the upper breast on our quiz bird (Figure 2), a mark often seen in juvenile redpolls. Note that the dark lores, black chin and red cap, that we associate with adult redpolls, do not begin to appear until the first prebasic molt is initiated.

Separation of the two redpolls in juvenal plumage can be complicated by the possibility of hybridization between them where their ranges overlap. In addition, final bill size may not have been attained on young juveniles, sometimes limiting the usefulness of bill assessment.

However, there are several field marks of use in separating the two species of redpolls. Hoary Redpoll has a decidedly stubbier bill with a straight culmen (like our quiz bird), whereas Common Redpoll has a larger bill with a noticeable curve to the culmen. Hoary Redpoll has a contrasting whitish rump, largely free of streaks, whereas Common Redpoll has a streaked rump that contrasts much less with the back. In Figure 1,

we don't see this bird's rump very well, as it is mostly hidden by the tertials. I did have an opportunity to examine this bird in-hand and it did have a very pale rump which contrasted with the streaked back (another nod to Hoary Redpoll). Hoary Redpoll has undertail coverts that have few or no dark shaft streaks, whereas Common Redpoll has more liberally streaked undertail coverts. We are not able to see this bird's undertail coverts in either of the photos; however, in-hand inspection revealed plain white coverts with no visible streaking. All the characters that I noted for this bird were consistent with an identification of juvenile **Hoary Redpoll**.

It is interesting to note that the standard North American field guides either don't illustrate juvenile redpolls or depict them poorly.

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It is probable that the reason redpoll fledged young were found in only five Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas squares was because most of the field work in suitable areas was done in the period before fledged young were likely to be present, as nests were found. However, lack of observer familiarity with juvenal redpoll plumage may have resulted in lower than expected numbers of fledged young being detected. In 2004, an atlas group working in far northwestern Ontario (near the Pen Islands) found several Hoary Redpoll nests, providing the first confirmed breeding evidence of this species for Ontario, pending review by the Ontario Bird Records Committee.

This juvenile Hoary Redpoll was photographed on 11 July 2001 in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, by Jim Richards.

Distinguished Ornithologist Award

The Distinguished Ornithologist Award is granted by the Ontario Field Ornithologists to individuals who have made outstanding and authoritative contributions to the scientific study of birds in Ontario and Canada, who have been a resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community, and whose research on birds has resulted in numerous publications and a significant increase in new ornithological knowledge. Recipients to date have been: Earl Godfrey (1997), Ross James (1998), Murray Speirs (2000), George Peck (2001), Bruce Falls (2002), Bob Curry (2003), Jim Rising (2004), and Ron Pittaway (2005). Bill Crins, Ron Pittaway and Ron Tozer form a committee responsible for proposing candidates for this award to the OFO Board of Directors.