

Nikon Photo Quiz

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Glenn Coady



Photo A



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Photo B

As a tribute to our recently published Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas 2001-2005, this photo quiz is a little more unconventional than usual. Perhaps it will assist those still experiencing pangs of withdrawal in this third breeding season since field work on the atlas was completed.

In these two photographs, I have presented the reader with two views of

the same nest, both before and after the hatching of the first egg.

Your assignment for this photo quiz is three-fold: decide how many species have laid eggs in this nest; identify the species which laid the eggs; and identify the species of the nestling.

The first impression we see from photo A is of a twig nest with minimal lining, containing three unmarked,

bluish eggs. Considering the colour of the eggs alone, the list of potential candidates is already fairly limited.

The number of Ontario breeding species that can have unmarked bluish eggs includes Double-crested Cormorant, several heron species (Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron and Green Heron), a variety of ducks (Mallard, Northern Pintail, Common Goldeneye, etc.), cuckoos (Black-billed Cuckoo and Yellow-billed Cuckoo), Gray Catbird, thrushes (American Robin, Wood Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Veery and Eastern Bluebird) and Dickcissel.

The placement of these three eggs in a twig nest within a bush effectively rules out further consideration of any duck species. A quick look at the nestling in photo B reveals that it is lacking the long, stout bill one would expect to see with nestlings of the Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron or Green Heron.

Another species easily eliminated is the Gray Catbird. It usually builds a nest that is completely lined, and its eggs are a much deeper, darker blue-green than any of the eggs in these photographs.

Likewise, most of the thrushes that lay unmarked blue eggs (American Robin, Wood Thrush, Hermit Thrush and Veery), have considerably deeper blue eggs than those seen in this nest. They also tend to have smaller eggs than those we see here, and clutch sizes that are generally larger. They also tend to build nests that are neater, more interwoven, and much more completely lined. The Dickcissel can also be ruled out using all of these same considerations.

Eastern Bluebird eggs are generally pale blue, but they are smaller than these eggs and the clutch size is usually larger. The Eastern Bluebird is almost exclusively a cavity nester, with open cup nests being



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extremely rare. Recently hatched blue-bird nestlings have bare dark skin and bright yellow gape lines along the bill, unlike our quiz bird.

By process of elimination, we now know that our quiz bird is therefore one of the two cuckoo species that breed in Ontario. One feature that we can see in the photographs that clearly supports that conclusion is the flimsy and loosely interwoven nest made of long twigs, and which has very minimal lining. These are typical characteristics of cuckoo nests.

The clearest indication that this is a cuckoo nest is found by observing the nestling in photo B. This bird has glossy, black skin with long, gray, almost porcupine-like or hair-like projections (neossophtiles) from the bare skin. The bird's open gape is bright red, with a complex pattern of (both small and large) creamy-white, disk-shaped markings, or papillae, on the palate and tongue. This is a distinctive pattern that readily identifies cuckoo nestlings.

The eggs of the two species of cuckoo in Ontario can be easily differentiated. The eggs of the Black-billed Cuckoo are darker, bluer, and smaller than eggs of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, which are predominantly white with a faint blue cast. Looking at photo A, this nest has two smaller, darker blue eggs and one larger egg with a faint blue cast. It would appear that this nest has eggs of both cuckoos. These two species of cuckoo are known to para-

sitize each others' nests frequently. Parasitism of either species by the Brown-headed Cowbird is rare, and the much shorter incubation and nestling periods for both cuckoos makes it most unlikely for a Brown-headed Cowbird chick to fledge successfully from a cuckoo nest.

Incubation by cuckoos is nearly continuous, and it begins with the laying of the first egg. This means the first egg to hatch in a parasitized nest is very highly likely to belong to the host species. The two photographs clearly show that one of the smaller, brighter blue eggs was the one that hatched, and therefore our nestling is a **Black-billed Cuckoo**. This Black-billed Cuckoo nest has been parasitized by a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Since intraspecific parasitism is known for both cuckoos, it is even impossible to be certain that both of the Black-billed Cuckoo eggs were laid by the same female!

This Black-billed Cuckoo nest was found north of Tilsonburg, Oxford County, by Jeff Balsdon, and photographed on 6 and 8 June 2006 by Mark Peck.