

## AT A GLANCE

Field identification has long been touted as an essential tool for the ornithologist whether he is investigating bird populations in distant lands, working on an avian ethology project, censusing birds on a breeding plot, studying migration, or building a large life or local bird list. In every case, the correct recognition of the bird species involved is critical to the precision necessary to have the effort be of both scientific and personal value.

In Massachusetts there is a long tradition of skilled field ornithologists dating back to the days of C. J. Maynard, William Brewster, C. W. Townsend, and Ludlow Griscom. Griscom, who has been called "the virtuoso of field identification," perhaps more than anyone, set a standard for field identification that is still used as a measuring stick today. As the precursor to Roger Tory Peterson's first field guide, Griscom successfully provided the interface needed to make the transition between the shotgun ornithologists of the last century and the modern binocular-wielding experts of today.

Many contemporary Massachusetts birders can still recall intimate contacts with Griscom and his standards of excellence. Yet, as with any area of study, new information, better field guides, better optics, increased mobility, and an increasing army of observers have all tended to produce a new corps of highly skilled observers, many of whom now possess skills matching or eclipsing those of the earlier masters.

Since much of the information and many of the field identification tricks amassed by this new army of experts are not yet between the covers of a single field guide, the neophyte birder of today has difficulty in gaining access to this new information unless he is in touch with these experts directly or is able to read the ever-growing ornithological literature with regularity.

The record compilers and the staff of Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts are increasingly aware of the frustration that often occurs over certain field identification situations that develop within the area covered by this journal. These frustrations result for various reasons, ranging from inadequate looks at particular birds to a lack of experience by the observers involved. In some cases, incomplete field guide information does not readily allow a correct identification to be made under field conditions. Some of these identification problems may never be resolvable due to an inadequate observation or to an incomplete observational record at the time of a particular bird-birder encounter. Nonetheless, many such troublesome encounters can be avoided if birders have as much pertinent information at their disposal as is possible.

It is with these facts in mind that "At A Glance" will become a regular feature in future issues of Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts. The column will include photos and field problems that are apt to be encountered in eastern Massachusetts or that have knowingly generated controversy at one time or another. Tips on solving such field problems, along with information that will be helpful to readers identifying such species in the future, will be provided by various local experts. Readers are invited to submit requests or high quality photographs that would be appropriate for this column.

#### AT A GLANCE - PHALAROPES

by Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

Seabirds frequently cause identification problems. Their habitat often makes observation difficult and distance can result in imperfect views that are inadequate for specific identification. Storm-petrels, phalaropes, jaegers, and large alcids all exemplify this situation. Of these, the two pelagic phalarope species, Red Phalarope (Phalaropus fulicarius) and Northern Phalarope (P. lobatus), are notorious.

Phalaropes at sea are frequently seen only in flight or in small flocks riding buoyantly on the waves, often in the vicinity of floating seaweed or slicks on the ocean's surface. Off the Massachusetts coast, both species pass northward in April and May and southward in August and September. Records suggest that Red Phalaropes occur later in the fall than northern, and it is likely that any phalarope seen after mid-October is a red. The pelagic distribution of the two species differs as well: Red Phalaropes show a greater tendency to migrate and concentrate farther offshore, e.g., Georges Bank, while Northern Phalaropes are the dominant species inshore and on near-shore fishing banks, e.g., Stellwagen Bank.

In breeding (alternate) plumage, both species are very distinctive and are adequately depicted in the standard field guides. In winter (basic) plumage, juvenile plumage, or in molting individuals, identification can be more critical. From a structural standpoint, the Red Phalarope is slightly larger and noticeably chunkier when seen afloat with Northern Phalaropes. Red Phalaropes appear thick-necked and heavy-chested and their bills are slightly longer than those of Northern Phalaropes. Red Phalarope bills are also thicker basally and somewhat blunt-tipped, quite unlike the needle-like bills of Northern Phalaropes. The yellowish base typical of spring-plumaged Red Phalaropes is apparently lost very quickly so that by mid-summer most individuals have entirely dusky bills, a feature that is seemingly true for juveniles as well.

Perhaps most useful for the identification of nonbreeding-plumaged birds is the pattern and coloration of the back. In Red Phalaropes, full basic-plumaged adults exhibit a pale gray back devoid of streaking or bicolored feather edging. This is in marked contrast to the darker, slaty-backed appearance of Northern Phalaropes. Northerns possess light stripes on the back due to white or golden feather fringes on the otherwise blue-gray mantle. Thus, in a mixed flock of floating phalaropes, basic-plumaged reds will stand out in contrast to the darker and streaked Northern Phalaropes. Molting birds can exhibit a mottled appearance which in Red Phalaropes can be suggestive of the streaked appearance of the Northern Phalarope. This effect, however, results not so much from white or golden fringing, but rather is caused by a mixture of old alternate feathers and new basic feathers. In such birds, structure, shape, and comparison with nearby birds of known identity can be helpful.

The juveniles of both species are distinctive. Juvenile Northern Phalaropes are very dark on the back and possess conspicuous golden fringes on the back feathers which form stripes. They are often buffy about the upper chest and throat, too. Red Phalaropes in a corresponding plumage are darker backed than adults, tending to be brownish-black with buffy feather edging. As in Northern Phalaropes, there is usually a buffy wash on the chest and sometimes on the sides of the rump as well.



*Photo by Alan Brady*

In addition to the distinctive back patterns, both species show a dusky eye patch and a corresponding crown patch that occasionally extends down the back of the neck. In Red Phalaropes these dusky markings are frequently lighter and less extensive. Northern Phalaropes always have prominent and extensive eye patches and very dark crowns. Any phalarope looking pale on the head is a good candidate for a red.

Red Phalaropes have considerably longer wings than northerns; thus, when afloat, they often appear both long and high astern much like a tiny Bonaparte's Gull (Larus philadelphia). Northern Phalaropes tend to ride lower astern, giving the appearance of more of the bird in the water.

In flight, identification can be difficult at a distance. At close range, Northern Phalaropes show a more contrasting white wing stripe, as well as the aforementioned back stripe. Red Phalaropes look similar to basic-plumaged Sanderlings (Calidris alba).

Given the facts above, it should be apparent that the birds in the accompanying photograph are Red Phalaropes. These individuals, photographed by Alan Brady on Stellwagen Bank in mid-August, 1981, appear to the author to be adults. The upper bird is in nearly full basic plumage while the lower bird appears to be an adult in molt from alternate to basic plumage. For readers interested in additional information, the following references are suggested:

- Finch, D. W., W. C. Russell, and E. V. Thompson. 1978. Pelagic Birds in the Gulf of Maine. American Birds 32: 281-294.
- Powers, K. D. 1981. Marine Seabird Research. Manomet Bird Observatory Newsletter, November 1981: 2-9.
- Prater, A. J., J. H. Marchant, and J. Vuorinen. 1977. Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders. British Trust for Ornithology Field Guide 17.
- Stallcup, R. W. 1976. Pelagic Birds of Monterey Bay, California. Western Birds 7: 113-136.

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# At a Glance . . .



*Photo by Dr. Alfred O. Gross*

*Courtesy of Massachusetts Audubon Society*

Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*.