

At a Glance . . .

August 1982 Photo

AT A GLANCE aims to provide the fun and challenge of a puzzle but also to improve our birding skills with New England birds. As BOEM's format is limited to black and white, an opportunity is provided to look for field marks in the absence of color. Although color provides one of the great aesthetic satisfactions of birding, it is a factor in identification that often leads to contention among birders in the field because it is so dependent on light and the perception of the viewer.

The picture problems presented here will deal with New England birds, breeders and migrants with perhaps an occasional rarity, and the solution should be possible for the general birder relying on field guide information. However, in the interest of education, some of the esoteric distinctions apparent in the photos will be discussed to give some insight into the subtleties of species differentiation not necessarily found in field guides and apt to be overlooked by slower or less experienced eyes in the fleeting glimpse one often has of birds in the field.

H. B. Kane's superb photo of a hawk (that much is easy) that appeared in August's BOEM provides much material for speculation. Two features that catch the eye tell the viewer at a glance that it is an immature: the breast streaking and the incompletely grown flight feathers revealed in the spread wing (despite the overexposure of the very white underwing). The next problem is to assign this immature hawk to its proper subgroup. The bird pictured is probably not a falcon: the wing seems too wide, i.e., is not long and pointed; the tail is too ample; and careful examination of the bill does not reveal the upper mandibular notch that is present in falcons. Nor does it seem possible that it is a harrier: the tail is too short.

Can it be an accipiter? At first glance, the wing seems to be rounded, but we must consider that the primaries are incompletely grown. Also, as already noted, the tail is short, and the dusky head appears rather heavy, not the small, angular head typical of accipiters. Note as well that the legs are short and sturdy; thus, the bird does not have the slender, long-legged jizz of the bird-hunting hawks. Although the light supercilium might suggest a young goshawk, the streak is not as broad nor as extensive as shown in the field guides. Also, the breast streaking is too coarse for a goshawk, and there is no sign of a fluffy white crissum. We can safely conclude that the pictured bird is not an immature of the accipiter genus.

How about a buteo? The background of oak (?) leaves offers one size comparison that suggests a small buteo. Despite this, we should proceed carefully and eliminate the larger buteos on other grounds. Is it a young Red-tailed Hawk? The chest is not white but is heavily streaked, and there is no dark mark at the bend (carpal joint) of the wing.

Red-shouldered Hawk can be eliminated as a possibility because the bird in our photo has white rather than dusky wing linings, the wings lack "windows" (pronounced in many young Redshoulders because of the contrast with the dark wing linings), and finally the tail is short.

There is one additional, rather subtle, indication of the kind of bird this is if we look carefully at the primary feathers. They do not seem to be emarginated (Look it up!). Emargination is a feature of the flight feathers that aids in soaring, the sort of flight associated with the more sedentary (W.Peterson's word), less migratory type of hawk, e.g., Redtail. The far-ranging migrant hawks (e.g., Broad-wing) for whom rapid gliding is an important adaptation show fewer emarginated flight feathers. The validity of this observation can perhaps be questioned because this is an immature bird but is included in the interest of expanding the reader's know-how in examining photographs.

What then remains in our diagnosis? The photo shows a small, immature buteo with a relatively short, indistinctly banded tail, a large expanse of white under a wing that is bordered by dark-tipped primaries. It must be a Broad-winged Hawk! May you be able to distinguish your next Broadwing at a glance!

D.R.A.

CALENDAR 1982 - 1983

TASL WINTER HARBOR SURVEYS

Boston Harbor

Sat., November 13, 1982
Sat., January 15, 1983
Sat., February 12, 1983
Sat., March 12, 1983

Newburyport Harbor

Sun., November 14, 1982
Sun., January 16, 1983
Sun., February 13, 1983
Sun., March 13, 1983

For details of times, meeting places and leaders, please contact TASL coordinators: Craig Jackson, 321-4382, or Soheil Zende, 628-8990.

More information on these censuses and other TASL activities appears in TASL News. To subscribe to TASL News, mail a check for \$2.50 payable to Bird Observer, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

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Photo by Herbert H. Dill

Courtesy of Massachusetts Audubon Society

Can you identify this bird?

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