

## AT A GLANCE - A LOOK ASKANCE

In the December 1984 issue of BIRD OBSERVER, two calidrid sandpipers were offered as puzzlers for the regular bird identification feature, At A Glance. In the February 1985 issue, Dorothy Arvidson attempted to unravel the riddle of their identity, while at the same time inviting the submission of further, if not alternative, reasoning as to the proper identification of the two shorebirds. With this in mind, I offer the following thoughts and impressions.

First, I believe both species are small peep - in fact, both birds are probably very close to the same size, as can be crudely measured with a ruler superimposed on the photograph. Apparently the photographer's angle when he captured these two birds on film was such that the left bird was slightly turned away from the camera, while the bird on the right is obviously turned toward the camera. This positioning seems to exaggerate the bill size of the light-legged bird on the right and, likewise, to shorten the bill of the bird on the left. Additionally, with regard to bill size, since both birds are in juvenile plumage (as Arvidson properly describes), it is therefore possible that neither individual's bill is fully grown, hence further accounting for the apparent shortness of the left bird's bill. When actually measured, approximate though the technique may be, there appears to be only a difference of a millimeter at most (in the photograph) between the two bills.

Second, the leg structure of the two birds seems comparable, although the bird on the left is apparently standing in deeper water. The extent of exposed leg above each joint seems similar, and the dark-legged bird's legs fail to seem sturdy enough to be those of a Sanderling. Similarly, a Pectoral Sandpiper standing so close to a Sanderling should certainly stand visibly taller, especially if standing in shallower water. I believe that if both birds were on terra firma, they would appear the same in stature, if not actually showing the bird on the left to be slightly longer-legged.

If these assumptions are correct to this point, then we have two peep depicted (not a Sanderling and a Pectoral Sandpiper, as suggested by Arvidson) that are comparable in size and proportions, one with dark legs and one with light legs. Based upon size, differential coloring (a light bird on the left and a dark bird on the right), a droopy-tipped, fine-pointed bill on the light-legged bird and a thicker-based, blunt-tipped bill on the dark-legged bird, I believe the birds to be Semipalmated Sandpiper (or Rufous-necked Stint!) on the left and Least Sandpiper on the right. The distinct fine streaks at the sides of the breast are consistent with juvenile-plumaged Least Sandpiper, as shown on the light-legged bird. Pectoral Sandpiper would show a much more heavily streaked breast and would not exhibit so much white in front of the folded wing, a difference due to the more extensive streaking extending farther around the sides of the upper breast.

While the ultimate determination of small sandpipers in juvenile plumage can be tedious even in life, a black-and-white photograph can only compound the problem. Observers are therefore advised to exercise great caution in making identifications from photographs and to remember that characters such as structure are better evaluated than color differences.

John Gavin's portrait of February's bird reveals a heavily streaked and darkly mottled sparrow or finch with two prominent features - a large, conical bill and a prominent white wing patch. The black mottling in patches under the chin, on the wing, and on the underside suggests that this is a molting bird. The streaking in combination with the large bill at once narrows the field. Two birds occur to me: Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Purple Finch. The grosbeak seems a possibility because the beak looks about right. The male Rose-breasted has black feathering and molts to a streaked bird with bold black-and-white flight feathers, but there is no black on the undersides. The broad supraorbital streak so pronounced in the female grosbeak is missing in our bird as are the two wingbars. A female Purple Finch has a more pronounced face pattern than this, a whitish eyebrow, and there is no black in the plumage.

Having eliminated those birds, we flip through the pages of the families Emberizidae and Fringillidae until about half way through the sparrows, we find a ringer for our bird - one with a large bill, a white patch on the wing, streaked plumage and, the field guide says, "some males in winter have some blackish mottling on the underparts." (Master Guide to Birding, 3: 246). This is a male LARK BUNTING in winter plumage, a bird of the western prairies who arrived in Massachusetts in the late summer of 1978, showing a lot of black feathers, and stayed long enough to molt into the bird pictured. *Calamospiza melanocorys*, formerly classified a fringillid, is now a part of the potpourri of warblers, tanagers, cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, sparrows, and icterids that is known as the family Emberizidae.

D.R.A.



Lark Bunting

Photo by John Gavin  
Courtesy of MAS

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ROBERT F. PEASE IS ALIVE AND WELL and still living on Howland Lane in East Sandwich. He wishes to announce that his book about the birds of Sandwich will be in print this spring.

# At a Glance . . .

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird? Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*. Bird Observer will award a PRIZE to the reader who submits the most correct answers in 1985. Please send your entry on a postcard to Bird Observer, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178 before the answer is published.

## THE WINNER

The winner of the 1984 At a Glance Contest for correctly identifying four of the five photos - December's birds were not included because their identification is in dispute - is KAREN HOLMES, Lakeville, and the prize is a \$25 book certificate. Congratulations, Karen!



***Happy 200th Birthday,  
John J. Audubon  
April 26, 1985***