

The identification of the owl photo in October's At a Glance was apparently no problem for our readers. All who wrote in identified it correctly.

Because owls have large heads with frontal, binocular vision and look at us straight on, our attention is apt to focus on the owl's face. Identification of a perched owl is very akin to the method we use in recognizing our human and other mammalian friends. A birding friend who loves the owls, as she does all raptors, often refers to them as "persons." When we are identifying owls in the field, a combination of fairly obvious characteristics such as voice or voice responded to, size, presence of ear tufts, habitat in which the bird is found, and flight or other behavior enable us to identify these raptors without much difficulty. Seldom is it necessary for us to examine critically the details of plumage the way we must when we are sorting out shorebirds or sparrows or flycatchers. But the plumage features of the owl in the October photo are exactly what must be examined in order to identify the bird correctly.

Karen Holmes wrote us that the plumage of the bird in October's photo is distinctive. She cited *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*, page 174 (J. Farrand, Alfred A. Knopf, 1983): "The breast is dark. . . with irregular white spots. The boldly patterned belly feathers are crosshatched and have conspicuous dark vertical markings." This description is similar to the one in *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, volume 4, page 572 (Stanley Cramp et al., Oxford University Press, 1985): "Underbody broadly streaked and blotched on chest and sharply streaked and barred (both boldly and finely) elsewhere." Karen further noted that Great Horned Owls "have underparts that are barred [only] and also display a noticeable white bib. The October At a Glance photo bird has no bib. . ." Hence, she eliminates *Bubo virginianus* as a possibility and identifies the bird as a Long-eared Owl.

Of course the presence of ear tufts on the pictured owl limits our choices to three species: the Great Horned, the Long-eared, and a screech-owl. We do not need to consider the minimally-tufted Flammulated Owl because it has not yet appeared in Massachusetts, and At a Glance only features birds that have been sighted in the Commonwealth. How can we eliminate screech-owl, which also has a streaked belly and ear tufts? There are no good clues in the photo as to the size of the bird or the length of the ear tufts, which are laid back close to the head. However, these tufts do seem to arise closer to the middle of the head than they do in *Asio otus*, the Eastern Screech-Owl. Finally, a careful evaluation of the face reveals that the facial disk is gently rounded and more elongate than is typical of the screech-owl. I concur with those readers who sent in their answers. The October photo is a picture of *Otus asio* - a very intriguing shot of a Long-eared Owl. D.R.A.

# At a Glance . . .

Photo by Roger Everett



Can you identify this bird? Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*.

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