

As plain as February's bird appears, it does offer a clue or two to its identity. Structurally, the relatively short legs and tail, stocky build, and fairly heavy bill are all features typical of various finches and sparrows. Most of these birds possess considerable streaking or striping about the head, and since this individual does not, we can immediately narrow the field of suitable candidates. Among the plain-headed members of this group, a grosbeak would possess a larger bill, and a bunting, junco, or goldfinch would have a smaller bill.

If not a finch, then it must be a finchlike bird, and this leads us to consider the Bobolink and the Brown-headed Cowbird. Apart from the fact that Bobolinks seldom perch on wooden structures and usually are sleek rather than scruffy as this bird certainly is, Bobolink can be discounted because the bird shown does not have pointed tail feathers; and an immature or a female cowbird does not have markings on the back and does not show nearly so much pale emargination on the secondaries or greater coverts.

The only remaining candidates are House Sparrow or Dickcissel. At this point, we again need only look at the rounded ends of the tail feathers. In the Dickcissel, as in the Bobolink, these are pointed. Additionally, the large pale bill provides us with further evidence that the mystery bird is a House Sparrow since Dickcissels possess a dark bill.

Often the best way to identify a bird at a glance is by what the Brits call "jizz"—the intangible aspects of a bird that, when taken as a whole, infuse a species with personality. Perhaps the most useful of such features in House Sparrows is a beady-eyed look that imparts to them a characteristic expression. This young bird was photographed in Lincoln, Massachusetts.



House Sparrow
Photo by Simon Perkins

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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