

Birders are often cautioned against making field identifications of birds solely on the basis of single field marks. Usually, multiple characteristics, in conjunction with a bird's behavior, vocalizations, habitat, seasonality of occurrence, and geographical distribution are desirable as supporting elements in making a correct determination. The physical characteristics of a bird, however, are often obscured or distorted such that an observer must use a single feature to make an identification. Indeed, April's mystery photograph requires that the reader use a single clue to identify the pictured bird, not only because of a distorted view of the bird but also because other supporting elements are not usable in the picture.

The bird's headless appearance in the photograph removes any identification clues offered by bill structure or head patterning, while the stretched wing precludes seeing the sides or underparts. The spread wing does, however, afford a look at the one diagnostic feature visible in the picture. Close examination reveals a series of distinct white tips to the primary coverts and a faint suggestion of pale coloration on the inner webs of one or two of the primaries. This white feather edging and the uniformly black appearance of the wing, back, and visible portions of the tail leads one to conclude that the picture can represent only one North American bird species: an immature male Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) in first winter plumage. The white tipping on the primary coverts will eventually develop into the extensive white wing patch of the adult male, parallel to the progressive acquisition of the species' distinctive yellow head and chest. While a quick look might suggest that the white spotting could be confused with the buffy bar that borders the scarlet shoulder patch of a male Red-winged Blackbird, the position of the spots on the primary coverts is very different than those on a Redwing, which are on the median coverts and which have a different orientation relative to the bend of the wing. The Yellow-headed Blackbird in the picture was photographed in September 1990 at South Monomy, Massachusetts.



*Photo by
Wayne R. Petersen*

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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