

April's mystery bird has distinctive field marks, as well as some features that may give pause to the inexperienced observer. Most obvious are a bold wing patch and what appears to be extensive pale coloration in the upper half of the tail. The angle of the bird's head does not afford a look at its bill, a feature that otherwise might be helpful in placing the bird into its correct family. The fact that its legs and feet are concealed also means that they are of no use in getting started on the identification process.

Perhaps the easiest approach to use when faced with identifying a bird whose family is unknown is to focus on whatever obvious field marks do exist. In this instance, the bold wing patch and unstreaked light underparts are the most useful combination of features to use. In eastern North American passerines, only the Northern Mockingbird and the Golden-winged Warbler share these features. However, a mockingbird would show two white wing bars and would have white running down the entire length of the outer tail feathers. Golden-winged Warbler can be eliminated since it has an extensive dark throat, a contrasting pale crown, and lacks pale coloration in the upper portion of its tail. Having removed the above species as possibilities, the only remaining candidate is the American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*). The bird's overall slim proportions, the pointedness of its primaries, the roundness of its head, and the relatively long tail all further suggest that the bird might be a redstart.

An adult male redstart has a black breast, a white belly, and white undertail coverts. The pictured bird is not in this plumage. Although the photograph does not allow the reader to determine whether the shadowy patch in front of the bird's shoulder is yellowish or orange-yellow, it is possible to see that the bird has a black face and a ring of black around the upper breast. These two features immediately indicate that the pictured bird is a male in its first spring plumage. The delayed acquisition of the complete breeding plumage in this warbler until its first full molt at about fourteen months of age has its most obvious analogue in the molt sequence of the immature male Summer Tanager. In some molting redstarts in their first spring, the black markings are less symmetrical and often are represented by black smudges on the breast.



American
Redstart
photographed
by Tom Martin
on Monhegan
Island
in May.

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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