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## AT A GLANCE *December 1996* \_\_\_\_\_ *Wayne R. Petersen*

In the last issue of *Bird Observer*, readers were invited to puzzle over a under exposed photograph of a shorebird that displayed ambiguous characteristics. As a result, the correct "identification" was that no positive identification was truly possible.

Readers are reminded that similar scenarios also occur in the field. Occasionally, adverse field conditions or an anomaly in a bird's plumage or behavior render a bird unidentifiable. Although few birders like to admit defeat in matters of field identification, sometimes leaving a bird unidentified is the prudent course to follow.

Having made this point, let me say that the last of the 1996 *At a Glance* mystery photos is also a tough call, not so much because of the conditions described above, but rather because of reality. With some groups of hawks, variation *within* a species can be almost as striking as differences *between* species. Since structure is subject to less variation than plumage, hawks are (paradoxically) often harder to identify at point-blank range than they are when they're just specks on the horizon. The December photo shows a hawk perched *very close at hand*. And so begins the problem.

When presented with a good look at a perched hawk, one can usually reduce the choices to one or two species. This assumes a good enough view to assign the unknown raptor to its correct genus. Ordinarily, the genera incorporating Ospreys, eagles, and Northern Harriers don't pose much of a problem to Massachusetts birders. But the genera—*Accipiter* (e.g. Sharp-shinned Hawk), *Buteo* (e.g. Red-tailed Hawk), and *Falco* (e.g. Peregrine Falcon)—can be more difficult.



*Photo by Emily Goode*

*Courtesy of MAS*

With a view like the one in the photo, it is possible to observe features normally visible only by close telescopic examination. For example, by noticing the absence of a prominent tomial notch ("tooth") on the cutting edge of the upper mandible, it is possible to eliminate all of the falcons as possibilities, since they characteristically possess this feature.

Moving on to accipiters, all species in fully adult plumage can be ruled out on the basis of the obvious vertical streaking on the breast, a feature characteristic of most juvenile or immature-plumaged accipiters and buteos. Adult accipiters normally exhibit a more or less horizontal pattern of breast barring, not vertical striping. An immature Northern Goshawk can be pretty much ruled out by the absence of an obvious, pale superciliary stripe. Likewise, immature Cooper's Hawks possess more angular heads, often with noticeably raised hackles, and their eyes tend to appear closer to the beak than to the nape, giving them a "small-faced" look. Young Sharp-shinned Hawks would ordinarily look slimmer, more round-headed, and smaller-billed than the mystery hawk, and frequently their breast stripes appear more dense and

irregular, particularly in the chest area.

This leaves only young buteos as candidates. Young Rough-legged Hawks in the light morph would normally look pale-headed, would typically show a dark line behind the eye, and even from the view shown would exhibit the suggestion of a dark belly band. The Red-tailed Hawk can at once be eliminated because the absence of streaks on a plain-colored breast is a signature field mark of that species. Of the regularly-occurring Massachusetts buteos, only Red-shouldered and Broad-winged hawks remain as possibilities.

Here is where the going gets *really* tough. Identifying juveniles of these two species can be a challenge even when the whole bird is visible; viewing only the upper half compounds the difficulties! Both species possess *variably* streaked underparts and a dusky malar stripe, and both often have at least an indistinct superciliary line. Even if the mystery photo were in color, the variability and similarity of these two species would do little to solve the problem.

Again, and for the second *Bird Observer* in a row, we have reached an identification crossroads. While the photo is clear and sharp, and the exposure is acceptable, *the view is incomplete*. For this reason, I would hesitate to claim certainty on which species is represented.

The point of this exercise is to emphasize that with young buteos, as with most hard-to-identify species, all features should be observed—wings, tail, shape, behavior, etc.—before the responsible birder can be wholly confident of a correct identification. The bird in the photograph is, in fact, a juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*). May 1997 bring us few such identification dilemmas!

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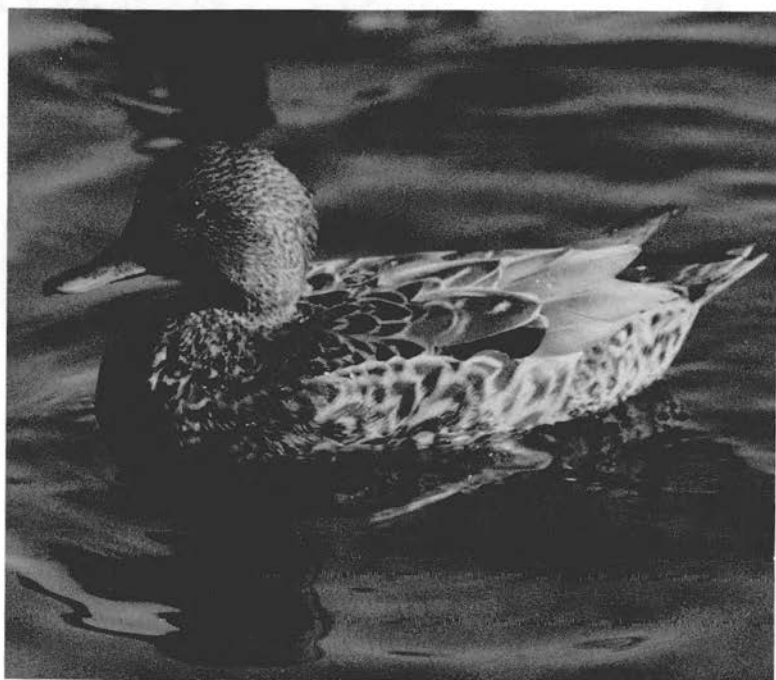
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## AT A GLANCE

Photo by Hugo H. Schroder Courtesy of MAS



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