

AT A GLANCE *December 1997* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

The final mystery photograph of 1997 shows a rather long-tailed, slim passerine with a rather short, straight bill and what appears to be a prominent eye-ring and at least one pale patch (possibly two) in the wing. Also noteworthy is the subject's small-headed appearance and the fact that the tail appears to have a slight notch at the end.

The bird's size relative to the branches around it suggests that the bird is not terribly small. In fact, by this criteria, it would seem that the bird might actually be mid-sized (e.g. catbird or thrush-sized). An obvious first possibility would seem to be Northern Mockingbird. Mockingbirds are slim, medium-sized, long-tailed birds with a white patches in the wing. However, mockingbirds don't have obvious eye-rings and their bills are relatively long and decurved X a feature shared by most of the mimic thrushes. In addition, if the mystery bird's tail is truly notched, then this would further eliminate the mockingbird, whose long tail is slightly rounded at the end. So what else looks like a Northern Mockingbird?



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen

Although we can reasonably eliminate the tiny Blue-gray Gnatcatcher as a possibility just on the basis of the bill size and overall size and bulk of the mystery bird, gnatcatchers actually do slightly resemble miniature mockingbirds. More to the point, they resemble the mystery bird, except for one important difference X posture. Gnatcatchers seldom, even when singing, hold their tails at the angle shown by the mystery bird. Most of the time their long, slender tails are held above the horizontal, vaguely suggesting a long-tailed wren. Furthermore, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers don't have conspicuous patches in their wings.

Two bluebird species have been recorded in Massachusetts: Mountain Bluebirds are extremely rare vagrants in the state, but the Eastern Bluebird is a locally common breeder and local winter resident. Bluebirds roughly match the apparent size of the mystery bird and share its straight, thrush-like bill. Moreover, bluebird tails are frequently visibly notched, and immature bluebirds (and sometimes adult females) may show an obvious eye-ring. But the tail of a bluebird would be much shorter than that of the mystery bird; no bluebird would show a distinct pale wing patch; and the general shape of a bluebird is somewhat plumper and larger-headed than what is shown in the photograph.

There is only one bird in North America that truly resembles the mystery bird. The combination of small-headed appearance, erect posture, long tail, conspicuous pale patch in the wing, bold eye-ring, and short, straight bill indicates Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*). Very careful examination of the soft photo reproduction further suggests that the bird in the picture has spots on its head, back, and belly. This spotting indicates that the bird is in juvenal plumage, often held in this species into late summer or early fall.

A vagrant in Massachusetts, the Townsend's Solitaire has been recorded fewer than a dozen times in the Bay State. All records are in late fall and winter, seasons when this western relative of the thrushes has abandoned its high-elevation summer quarters and migrated southward or into neighboring valleys and lowlands for the winter. The juvenile Townsend's Solitaire in the picture was photographed in Colorado.

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Photograph by Wayne Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

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

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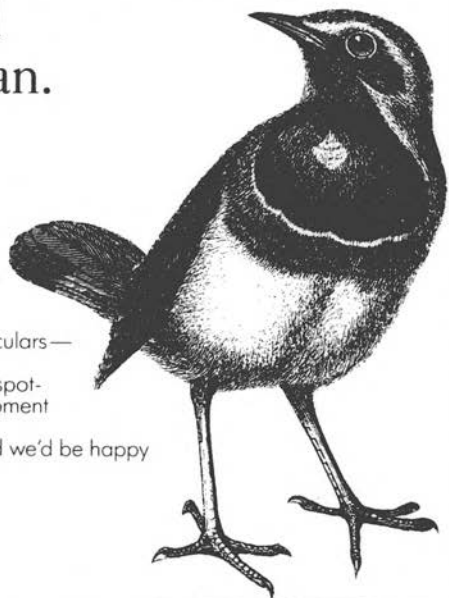
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