

A glance at April's mystery species reveals an all-black bird with dark eyes, a heavy bill, and relatively thick legs. The fact that its eyes are dark and its tail is relatively short and unkeeled helps remove adult male Common Grackle and Rusty Blackbird, as well as the rare (in Massachusetts) Brewer's Blackbird, as identification possibilities. Although juvenile grackles and Rusty Blackbirds also have dark eyes, as do female Brewer's Blackbirds, the large size of the mystery bird's bill and the length and shape of its tail serve to remove them as identification possibilities. The bill shape is also wrong for a Brown-headed Cowbird, which, even in a black-and-white photograph, would show a contrast between a brown head and black body. And finally, the absence of speckles on the plumage, or a pale bar on the greater wing coverts, eliminates European Starling and Red-winged Blackbird as candidates, respectively.

Having removed all of the regularly occurring Massachusetts blackbirds as identification possibilities, the obvious remaining choice is between the American Crow, Fish Crow, and Common Raven. These three corvid species, all of which are black in any plumage, range in descending size from the 24-inch Common Raven to the 16-inch Fish Crow. In addition to their great overall size, ravens possess massive bills, shaggy feathering on their throats, and broad, wedge-shaped tails. Clearly, the corvid in the photo is not a Common Raven.



*Photograph by Hal Harrison*

The choice thus becomes one between American Crow and Fish Crow. American Crows range from 17-21 inches in length, while Fish Crows range from 16-20 inches. Obviously, with so much overlap in size, this is not an entirely reliable method for separating these two otherwise similar species, especially in a photograph! Structurally, Fish Crows are somewhat more delicate than American Crows,

particularly their bills, and their tails are proportionally longer than those of American Crows. But once again, these features can be difficult to assess from a single photograph. The bottom line: it probably is not possible to say with certainty what the mystery crow is from the photograph provided — an unfortunate reality, not a dirty trick. As most birders know, Fish Crows are best identified by their single, nasal, *cah* or *aah-aah* call notes, or by several other somewhat less distinctive vocalizations. In addition, they are rather pointed-winged in flight, and their wing beats tend to be rapid and stiff, not deep and rowing as those of an American Crow. Furthermore, Fish Crows tend to be more buoyant on the wing than American Crows, often gliding, sailing, and soaring in swirling flocks when present in large numbers. In some respects the differences between the flight behavior of American Crows and Fish Crows can be compared with the flight differences between Herring Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls.

Since the crow in the photograph is neither flying or calling, it is best left simply as a crow species. That's the safest thing to do when trying to make an identification like this. Hopefully this exercise will stimulate readers to watch American Crows more carefully in the future, specifically with a mind toward learning the nuances of differentiating them from Fish Crows.

The bird in the photograph is actually an American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) — a widespread and abundant species throughout Massachusetts at all times of year. The Fish Crow, while present throughout the year, is much less common and is generally most common in southeastern parts of the state in summer and around large dumps or in residential areas in Greater Boston during the winter.

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