

AT A GLANCE

February 2001



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen


The first mystery photograph of 2001 quite obviously depicts a sparrow, based upon the bird's conical, seed-cracking bill, prominent wing bars, and plain breast. Although several species besides sparrows display some of these features, none exhibit all three. For instance, a female Indigo Bunting would appear more uniform in appearance and would generally not have such bold wing bars. Likewise, a female or winter-plumaged American Goldfinch would have a shorter tail and display a more complex wing pattern on blackish wings that would strongly contrast with a lighter-colored body. A Pine Siskin and the females of both House and Purple finches would be heavily streaked on the underparts even though they have seed-cracking bills.

Using a traditional approach to determine which species of sparrow is featured in the picture, a quick analysis reveals that the breast is unstreaked. Because many sparrows have streaked underparts, either as adults or sometimes only in juvenal plumage, all such species and age classes can at once be eliminated as identification possibilities. This is a major first step in determining the identity of the mystery sparrow.

Other specific characters to note on the sparrow in the photograph are its uniform, pale-colored bill, neat white eye ring, and uniformly darkish crown. On the

basis of the completely pale bill alone, the American Tree Sparrow can be eliminated, since this species has a distinct dark upper mandible, as well as an obvious dark spot in the center of its breast. Two other similar species are Chipping Sparrow and Clay-colored Sparrow. Both of these species are shaped somewhat like a Field Sparrow (they are in the same genus, *Spizella*); however, neither species has a prominent eye ring and both tend to exhibit a median crown stripe of varying intensity. The Clay-colored Sparrow, especially, also possesses a distinct mustache streak, a feature totally lacking on the pictured sparrow.

The last remaining candidate, based on the pale bill color, is White-crowned Sparrow in immature plumage. Since immature White-crowned Sparrows characteristically have a more erect posture than Field Sparrows, lack an eye ring, and have lighter-colored faces in contrast with broad, buffy eyebrow stripes, the sparrow does not appear to be a White-crowned Sparrow. Thus, the final identification is reduced to Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*).

Field Sparrows are uncommon to locally common summer residents in Massachusetts in old fields, overgrown pastures, along power line rights-of-way, and in regenerating burned woodlands. They are also common migrants and uncommon winter visitors, primarily on the coastal plain. The Field Sparrow in the picture was photographed in winter at the author's feeder. 

Wayne R. Petersen

News from MassWildlife

Preliminary Eagle Survey Tally — State Ornithologist Brad Blodget has finalized numbers from the 2001 Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey and reports a total of 61 bald eagles (44 adults, 17 immatures) wintering at nine locations in Massachusetts on January 12. Eagles were reported from the Quabbin Reservoir (23), Connecticut River (18), Merrimack River (7), Assawompsett Pond (2), Silver Lake (4), Housatonic River (2), Wachusett Reservoir (1), Taunton River (1) and Westport Rivers (3). Sixty eagles were reported in 2000 and a record 76 eagles tallied during the 1998 survey. Blodget speculates that eagles moved to open water areas of major rivers as lakes and reservoirs froze solid making fish and waterfowl inaccessible. The 18 eagles noted on the Connecticut River was the highest total recorded in that location since the survey began in 1979. Blodget extends his thanks to all cooperators who submitted reporting forms and recognizes National Grid USA/Mass Electric Company for their long-standing commitment and sponsorship of eagle conservation in the Commonwealth. Contact Brad Blodget, 508-792-7270 x152.

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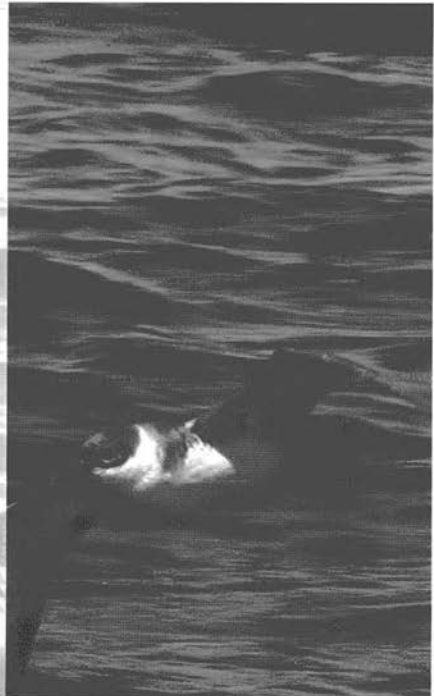


Can you identify this bird?
Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

Shearwater

Peter Trull — WILD CAPE COD

Too many birds for one to see
August on the open sea
As billow builds to boundless trough
My pinions stiffly streak and laugh
Under gales - such force implores
To drive me on to ancient shores
Effortless I glide and sway
With miles to go, no dark or day
Wind and whales, food forever
Ravenous, gluttonous birds endeavor
To cross the equator spring and fall
Penguins, puffins, I stir them all
Cetaceans in reverence and in slaughter
Been there and back
Seen it all
Shearwater



Photograph by Steve Mirick