

AT A GLANCE

February 2002




ROGER S. EVERETT

A casual observer of birds can generally recognize a duck, even though there are a number of other waterbirds that can swim like ducks. However, in the case of this month's mystery species, the obviously broad-based and relatively flat bill are a dead giveaway that the bird is a duck, not a loon or grebe, which would either have a dagger-shaped or sharply pointed bill, or an American Coot, whose uniformly gray coloration and striking white bill would at once remove that species as a possibility. Cormorants, which can look superficially like dark, duck-like birds in the water, have long, slender bills with a distinct terminal hook. Alcids, which can swim like ducks, tend to be prominently black above and white below, and never exhibit bills as broad and flat as the bill on the waterfowl in the photograph.

Having established that the bird is a duck reduces the identification possibilities considerably. Clearly, the most obvious feature of the pictured species is the presence of two white spots on the side of the head. These markings, combined with the overall dusky or dark coloration of the body, at once narrow the field to either a female Harlequin Duck, or an immature or female Surf or White-winged Scoter. Female Greater Scaups occasionally show a diffuse, pale patch on the side of the head; however, their foreheads are more abrupt and their heads are more rounded and less flat on top than the duck in the picture. Also, a scaup's bill would likely appear paler in color and would not be as broad at the base as a sea duck like a scoter.

With the knowledge that the mystery bird is a sea duck, head pattern and bill conformation becomes critical to making a positive identification. The female and juveniles of the Harlequin Duck typically exhibit three white spots on the head, one characteristically being small and round and located in the middle of the face. The other two are situated near the base of the bill, one at the base and the other slightly above the base, the two sometimes merging to produce a diffuse white patch when seen from a distance. On the water, Harlequin Ducks of either sex appear quite dark, with tiny bills, and relatively long tails which are often cocked, giving them a rather buoyant or jaunty aspect when swimming. The bird in the photograph is not a Harlequin Duck.

Knowing that the choice is now one between Surf Scoter and White-winged Scoter, it is necessary to concentrate on the exact shape of the bill. Surf Scoters in any plumage possess a bill that is quite broad and deep at the base when viewed from the side. By contrast, the bill of a White-winged Scoter appears slightly smaller and is more attenuated and pointed at the tip. More importantly, the basal portion of the bill is much narrower than in a Surf Scoter, and the face is more extensively feathered above the gape when viewed from the side. In addition, even White-winged Scoters usually display at least a hint of their extensive white wing patches, even when swimming. Using these hints, it should be obvious that the mystery duck is a Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*), almost certainly an immature female, as suggested by the very dark cap and prominent and extensive white face patches.

The Surf Scoter is an abundant migrant along the coast in fall, and large numbers regularly winter in Massachusetts waters, especially off Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. The spring flight is less obvious because most Surf Scoters follow a slightly different migration route in this season than they do in fall. Roger S. Everett photographed the Surf Scoter in the picture on Cape Cod. 

Wayne R. Petersen



Long-eared Owl at Daniel Webster WS, Marshfield

ED SLATTERY

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Can you identify this bird?

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

Get Involved!

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If you want to find out more, call or e-mail Marj Rines at 781-643-6128, marj@mrines.com.