

AT A GLANCE

June 2002



DAVID LARSON


Through the years of selecting suitable photos for this column, I have usually tried to choose photos that would hopefully offer some particular identification challenge for the reader. Sometimes this has been done by depicting a seldom seen plumage (e.g., juvenile Snow Bunting), a plumage anomaly (e.g., leucistic Common Grackle), an interesting posture (e.g., Yellow-headed Blackbird with its head hidden by its wing), or simply a poor photograph (e.g., We won't go there!). In a few cases, with assistance from the printer, I have even depicted birds upside down (e.g., Black-headed Gull)! In most cases, however, I have tried not to lose sight of the reality that the images need to be at least potentially identifiable by the thoughtful reader. Even on this point, however, there have been exceptions (e.g., a possible hybrid shorebird on Martha's Vineyard). So what does all this have to do with this month's mystery photo? Everything.

June's challenge photo clearly depicts a "departing" species, that is, a bird taking flight. While it should be obvious to most readers, in order to properly unravel the identification problem presented in the photograph, it is critical to have the picture properly oriented. A close look at the position of the bird's legs and feet, as well as the fact that the photograph depicts the underside of its wings, indicates that the bird

is flying away from the photographer. A closer inspection reveals that the bird is clearly a long-legged species, such as a heron or egret, whose legs and feet are fairly stout, not slim and delicate as would be the case with most shorebirds. Also, with close scrutiny, it is just possible to see the suggestion of a slight palmation (web) between the inner and middle toe on the bird's right foot. This feature further suggests that the bird is a heron or egret of some sort.

Given the mystery bird's long leg length, coupled with the absence of complete webs between the toes, a feature that would be typical of a number of waterbirds other than herons and shorebirds, it is fair to assume that the bird is indeed a long-legged wader. Either because the pictured bird's lower back and tail are obviously not dark in color, or because the leg color is obviously pale with little contrast between the color of the legs and the feet, it is variously possible to eliminate species such as American Bittern, Least Bittern, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, adult Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, and Glossy Ibis as possibilities. The white "thighs," instead of rusty-brown, combined with the relative shortness of the legs, serve to remove Great Blue Heron as a candidate. The fact that the tail, lower back, and rump appear light gray instead of white takes immature Little Blue Heron and Cattle Egret out of the running.

Having thus substantially reduced the list of possibilities, the remaining candidates are either Black-crowned Night-Heron or Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. Since the underwings and ventral areas of a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron would be substantially darker than those of a Black-crowned Night-Heron, at this point it is safe to assume that the departing heron in the photograph is an adult Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*).

Black-crowned Night-Herons are locally common coastal breeders in Massachusetts, and they regularly occur inland, especially in late summer after nesting. Small numbers occasionally winter along the coast from Boston to Cape Cod and the Islands. David Larson photographed the night-heron in the picture with a digital camera at World's End Reservation in Hingham.  Wayne R. Petersen

Letter to the editor:

I have been reading the latest issue of Bird Observer and in my opinion it is the best magazine yet . . . The pictures inside the front cover are wonderful. I read from beginning to end the article on Charles Maynard. Hell, he was alive when I was 7 years old. The article on birds nesting in Essex County was damned interesting. I enjoyed the article on the Tree Swallow nesting, the At A Glance I BLEW. Never in a million years would I have guessed Blue Teal. During the many years I was birding with Margaret Argue we would often climb the tower at the South Pool and all these ducks would be in eclipse plumage — July/August. "Miserable things," Margaret muttered. "I'm not going even to look at you until you have changed into a plumage a normal person can identify." And she didn't!

Sincerely,
Henry Wiggin

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WAYNE R. PETERSEN

Can you identify this bird?

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

Contribute to *Bird Observer*

Bird Observer gladly considers for publication manuscripts or article proposals from any member of the birding community. We are also interested in considering quality photographs with avian themes. The only requirement is that material be relevant to New England birds and birders.

Among the types of material we'd like to see:

- Articles presenting original scientific research
- Documentation of significant records
- "Hot Birds" photographs of rare or unusual birds in New England
- Field notes describing interesting encounters with birds
- Biographies of ornithologists or birders with regional ties
- Results of surveys and censuses
- "Where to Go" articles describing good birding locales
- "Pocket Places," brief descriptions of small hotspots
- Articles on birding equipment or methods
- Notices and news items

Send manuscripts or proposals to the Editor: Brooke Stevens, 5 Hemlock Road, Cambridge, MA 02138, or via e-mail attachments in Word doc or txt or rtf formats to brookestev@aol.com. Send photographs (prints or slides) to the Production Editor: David Larson, 1921 Central Street, Stoughton, MA 02072, or for digital images, via email at davlar@bu.edu.