

# AT A GLANCE

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August 2003



MARJORIE RINES

This month readers are fortunate that the mystery photograph unequivocally represents a raptor, specifically a hawk, of some sort. If there is a downside to this quick analysis, it is the fact that the bird is perched. However incongruous this may sound, the author has long held the opinion that perched raptors sometimes prove more difficult to identify than those in flight. Despite the fact that certain birders are apparently able to identify distant specks in the sky (seemingly the size of vitreous floaters in the human eye!) with incredible precision, a perched raptor observed at close range frequently draws a deafening silence from a gathering of even the most experienced birders (e.g., see “Massbird at Its Best – Mystery Accipiter Caper,” *Bird Observer* 31: 234-236).

With this caveat in mind we can begin to consider the aspects that are critical to note when trying to identify a perched hawk. Many birders, other than those at the entry level, are aware that the majority of hawks encountered in Massachusetts belong to one of three genera – *Accipiter*, *Buteo*, and *Falco*. Although the Northern Harrier is another commonly observed species, it can be eliminated as an identification candidate, since the pictured bird fails to have the long tail, prominent white rump, and owl-like face of a harrier. Additionally, Northern Harriers seldom perch in trees to devour their prey, which is clearly what the mystery hawk is doing.

Accipiters have notably long tails that extend substantially beyond the tips of their folded wings; long and relatively thin tarsi; especially long, thin claws (well

adapted for capturing birds); tails with relatively narrow bands (especially juveniles); and relatively small heads and beaks. Falcons tend to be quite round-headed, long-tailed, and pointed winged (especially in flight), and most have at least a trace of a facial pattern or mustache-like marking(s) on the cheek. Buteos are robust in overall build, with relatively short tails, large heads, and heavy beaks; plain, unmarked faces; and thick, powerful tarsi (well adapted for capturing small mammals). A careful examination of the pictured hawk suggests that its overall shape, proportions, facial pattern, and heavy legs place it in the genus *Buteo*.

Having established that the bird in the picture is a Buteo, identification is quite simple. A look at the bird's short tail and correspondingly short extension beyond the folded wings reveals a single, wide white band across the mid-portion of the tail. This feature alone tells us that the mystery hawk is an adult Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*). If the bird were an adult Red-shouldered Hawk, the tail would exhibit two or more narrow white bands, rather than a single wide one. Also, the dark markings on the sides of a Red-shoulder would be narrower and more wavy, not so widely separated and arrow-shaped. If the bird in the picture were a juvenile and only displayed narrow dark bands on the undersurface of the tail, the identification would be more critical, but since it is an adult, its identification is unambiguous.

Broad-winged Hawks are relatively common breeding birds across most of forested Massachusetts, in addition to being common spring migrants and occasionally abundant September migrants, primarily at inland hawk watching localities, such as Wachusett Mountain and Mount Watatic. The image of the adult Broad-winged Hawk depicted in this issue was obtained by Marjorie Rines in Lincoln, MA. 

Wayne R. Petersen



DOWITCHERS BY DAVID LARSON

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DAVID LARSON

Can you identify this bird?

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

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