

## AT A GLANCE

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October 2003



DAVID LARSON

Don't you hate it when this happens? A bird that you are trying to see or identify only partially reveals itself, or is otherwise half-hidden, by an interfering bird feeder or tree branch. I suspect many readers have experienced this phenomenon at one time or another, such as when trying to view a rare hummingbird on the back side of a hanging feeder! Given the frequency of this challenging (if not irritating!) situation, it seems reasonable to feature an identification puzzle presenting just such a circumstance.


An immediate impression gained by the relatively small size of the pictured bird's eye is that the half-hidden mystery species is probably overall quite small. Furthermore, the bird is obviously quite pale (possibly white) beneath, although it clearly has distinct ventral streaking, most noticeable at the sides of the upper breast. While we cannot be certain from the printed image that the color of the bird's underparts are white, it would appear unambiguous that the bird has a very dark (black?) chin or throat patch. This feature alone provides something to work with.

There are relatively few eastern North American passerines that have a black chin or throat patch as reduced in extent as that shown by the mystery bird. Several species that could possibly present an impression similar to that demonstrated by the pictured bird are any chickadee species, Cedar Waxwing, House Sparrow, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Dickcissel, and both Common and Hoary redpoll. Taking the dark-

throated impression a step further, it might also be reasonable to consider things like Black-throated Gray Warbler, Harris's Sparrow, and Orchard Oriole. This actually represents quite a broad assortment of species from a number of different avian families.

Here is how to eliminate these species one by one. First, the presence of clearly defined streaks on the sides of the breast at once removes chickadees (as does the absence of a black cap and a white face), House Sparrow, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Dickcissel, and Orchard Oriole. These are plain-breasted species, despite the fact that they have dark on the chin or throat area. Although juvenile Cedar Waxwings (which regularly retain their juvenal plumage late into the fall) have streaks on their breast, they also have a crest and lack the black mask and chin patch of adults. The Black-throated Gray Warbler has a well-defined black cheek patch, which is separated from a black crown by a bold white stripe behind the eye. And finally, an adult Harris's Sparrow would show a black crown, in addition to a black face and a black bib on the upper chest.

Having now removed nearly all of the viable identification possibilities, it seems pretty clear that the mystery species can only be a redpoll (*Carduelis* sp.). This identification is consistent with the apparent white underparts, streaks at the sides of the breast, distinct black chin patch, and the fact that the bird in the picture appears to be feeding at a seed feeder, something redpolls routinely do while visiting Massachusetts during the winter. Because of the angle of the pictured bird, and the fact that the image is not in color, it is not possible to say with certainty what species, gender, or age is represented by the redpoll in the photograph.

Redpolls (i.e., Common Redpolls) are irregularly common to locally abundant irruptive winter visitors to Massachusetts. In some years redpolls are practically absent in the Bay State, while in others they are widespread and regular visitors at bird feeders or in weedy fields inland or grassy sand dunes near the coast. The image of the redpoll depicted in this issue was obtained by David Larson at a bird feeder at Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Easthampton, Massachusetts. 

Wayne R. Petersen



GREEN HERON BY DAVID LARSON

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JIM BERRY

Can you identify this bird?

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

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