

AT A GLANCE

December 2003



JIM BERRY

This, the final identification challenge of 2003, should be mercifully obvious, at least as a passerine species. In fact, in the spirit of seasonal benevolence, the mystery bird should prove relatively easy to identify. There are only two really viable options to consider when trying to nail down the identity of the bird in the picture.

Approaching the identification problem from a rational perspective, the most obvious points to consider are the fact that the mystery species has prominent streaks on its underparts, at least one sharply defined wing bar, quite a long tail, and a bill that appears slightly curved and definitely pointed at the tip. The reader also gains the impression that the bird's back is fairly uniform and not heavily streaked. And finally, though admittedly not easily discernable in the printed photograph, the bird's iris is pale. To appreciate this fact, the reader needs to see that the bird's eye is located *behind* the dark loreal streak that runs from the base of the bill to the iris itself.

With these field marks in hand the identification diagnosis is straightforward. There are only two legitimate identification possibilities if one remembers that we are only dealing with bird species that have occurred in Massachusetts. Although there are a number of birds that have streaks below (e.g., many sparrows), the thin and pointed bill at once eliminates all the seedeaters. Thrushes can similarly be eliminated since their ventral markings are spots, not streaks; also, few thrushes exhibit prominent wing bars. If we are determined to expand the list of possibilities with streaked

underparts, then all the warblers so marked can be eliminated by the mystery bird's long tail, long legs, and distinct malar (i.e., jaw) stripe.

The thoughtful reader at this point should have narrowed the candidates down to a choice between an American Pipit and a thrasher of some sort. American Pipit is a potentially strong candidate except for two major points: the mystery bird's light iris and its distinct wing bars. Otherwise, a pipit would seemingly be a pretty good fit, at least from the photographic perspective. However, the ventral streaks on a pipit would ordinarily look more like a necklace across the mid-breast and would seldom appear as crisp, especially down onto the flanks.

Having reduced the possibilities to a species of thrasher, a reasonable first assumption would be Brown Thrasher. A Brown Thrasher, however, would have much bolder streaks beneath, typically more pronounced wing bars, and an even longer tail than that shown by the pictured species. The only remaining choice is Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*). The photograph is actually a quintessential representation of a Sage Thrasher: pale iris, crisp and extensive streaks on the underparts, and distinct wing bars. What cannot be seen are the tiny white tips to the outer tail feathers (unlike the completely white outer tail feathers of an American Pipit).

A vagrant in Massachusetts, the only Bay State record of Sage Thrasher is an individual that was photographed October 26, 1965 at Plum Island. The Sage Thrasher in the photograph was taken by Jim Berry at Cape Neddick, York, Maine, in November 2001. 📷

Wayne R. Petersen



NANTUCKET BIRDING BY DAVID LARSON

AT A GLANCE



BILL LAWLESS

Can you identify this bird?

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

Mass Audubon, in Partnership with the Essex County Ornithological Club, Announces the 12th Massachusetts Birders Meeting

When? March 6 and 7, 2004

Where? Peabody Marriott

What? *Birding with a Purpose* (helping to support bird conservation)



Please join us in March on the North Shore for a day of presentations and exhibits on Saturday and for field trips to Cape Ann and Plum Island on Sunday (led by the Joppa Flats Education Center and Essex County Ornithological Club).

Our keynote speaker will be Chandler Robbins, Ph.D., creator of the national Breeding Bird Survey, author of the *Golden Guide Birds of North America*, and senior editor of the *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Maryland and D.C.* Other presentations will cover land conservation and development, Christmas Bird Counts, breeding birds in Essex County, electronic birding resources, the Swarovski Birding Community, and the Important Bird Areas program.

The first 200 people to register will be entered into a drawing for a pair of Swarovski EL binoculars!

Information and registration forms are available online at <http://www.massaudubon.org/> or call Linda Cocca at 781-259-2150.