

AT A GLANCE

February 2004



BILL LAWLESS

To kickoff 2004, the At a Glance mystery bird has the reader looking at only a partial bird. In this case, it might seem that a rather critical part of the bird is obscured — the head! This fact should not be too daunting, however, since oftentimes birders fail to obtain complete looks at birds' heads, such as when viewing roosting shorebirds, sleeping waterfowl, diving alcids, or practically any bird flying directly away from the observer. With this in mind, let us try to carefully evaluate what we can see.

First, what does the habitat look like where the image was captured? From the texture of the substrate, the presence of what seems to be a painted line in the foreground, and possibly some ice or snow in the background, a hypothesis might be that the bird is on an asphalt parking lot, probably in the winter. Second, what is the bird doing? By its posture — head down, tail up — it seems reasonable to assume that the bird is either picking at something on the ground (food?) or possibly drinking from a small depression.

With these simple clues as background for an analysis, let us concentrate on the bird itself. It clearly has two white wing bars, separated by a rather wide panel of uniform coloration; streaks on the sides; a notably short tail in relation to the tips of its folded wings; and a prominent, dark, J-shaped (?) marking on the rear portion of the side of its face. This last mark, even though the overall face is obscured, appears

to be pronounced, particularly when it appears to be located below what resembles a broad supercilium, in contrast to an obviously contrasting plain nape.

Given that the bird has streaked sides, combined with two distinct white wing bars, and appears to be feeding from the ground, a sparrow of some type would be a reasonable first guess. Curiously, however, there are not a lot of sparrows that share both of these characteristics, especially considering the bird's obviously short tail in relation to the folded primary tips. An American Tree Sparrow would seem like a possibility, just based upon the strong wing bars and possibly also the dark marking on the side of the face; however, tree sparrows have long tails (like all *Spizella* sparrows) and they definitely do not possess streaked sides and flanks. A White-throated Sparrow in its first winter might give the impression of the kind of side streaking shown by the mystery bird, but like other sparrows with strong wing bars, would also exhibit a much longer tail and would also not have such a conspicuous pale nape. Unfortunately, no other sparrow species are viable candidates.

So what are the other alternatives? How about a redpoll? There were plenty of those around this winter. Indeed, redpolls sometimes feed on the ground in parking lots, possess streaked underparts and display distinct wing bars. Unfortunately, however, a redpoll would not display a strong facial pattern and a broad supercilium the way the mystery bird does. These same characteristics also eliminate a Pine Siskin as a candidate.

At this point in the process, there are few realistic alternatives remaining. So let's go back to thinking about what kinds of small, streaky birds might be likely to feed on the ground in a snow-covered parking lot. Only two or three should immediately come to mind: Horned Lark, Snow Bunting, and Lapland Longspur. Now the choice is easy, since neither Horned Larks nor Snow Buntings have streaked flanks. Lapland Longspurs (*Calcarius lapponicus*), however, are streaked on the sides and flanks, have a broad supercilium and a pale nape, and display, in the words of David Sibley, a "dark frame on the auriculars" (i.e., "ear region"). It is a portion of this frame that gives the J-shaped marking described previously. Once these features are collectively considered, the identification of the mystery bird is actually quite straightforward.

Lapland Longspurs are uncommon late fall migrants and winter visitors in Massachusetts, where they are most often encountered in small flocks on coastal salt marshes and sand dunes, or on extensive barren fields in the interior. Bill Lawless captured this digital image of the Lapland Longspur at Salisbury, Massachusetts. 

Wayne R. Petersen



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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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