

AT A GLANCE

April 2004



DAVID LARSON

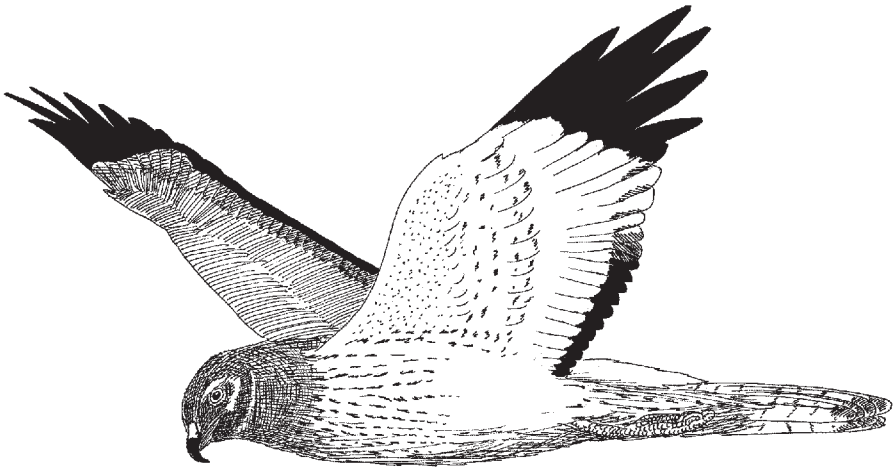
Wow! Here's a tough one! In addition to providing a useful tool for birders attempting to document unusual sightings, digital imagery also offers an improved technology for capturing unusual views of common species. Given the tradition of the *At A Glance* column to feature Massachusetts birds, it stands to reason that this month's mystery image probably represents a reasonably familiar species seen from something other than a familiar perspective.

Based upon the length of the pictured bird's wings, along with the apparent bulk of its body as seen from below, it is safe to assume that it is a fairly large bird, rather than a small passerine of some sort. Closer examination also reveals that the bird appears to be mostly white below, along with having decidedly pointed wings that are white underneath with sharply contrasting black wingtips. Unfortunately, because of the angle of the bird in the picture, it is impossible to see the length of its tail relative to the rest of its body. There is, however, the suggestion that the tail is dark, rather than white. More important is the fact that either the base of the tail, or possibly the bird's rump, is sharply white.

Assuming that our perceptions of color and pattern are correct to this point, then we have to carefully consider what field marks remain that could possibly be helpful. A close look at the long, slender wings suggests that, in addition to having black wingtips, they also appear to have a thin trailing edge along the secondaries (a point visible on the bird's left wing). Also, the wings look as though they may be set at a slight upward angle (i.e., a dihedral) and that they fail to exhibit a noticeable kink, or bow, at the "elbow."

Although it is clear that immature gulls in certain plumages can exhibit a white rump or white base to an otherwise dark tail, it is also clear that gulls ordinarily show an obvious bow or joint in their extended wings. When the combination of white underparts, white rump, pointed wings with black wing tips, dark line along the rear edge of the wing, and uptilted (not bowed) wing posture are taken together, the best choice for the mystery bird is an adult male Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*). An immature gull would probably appear more robust than the bird in the photo, and the distinctive, straight-winged aspect of the mystery bird should, almost by itself, indicate that the image is not that of a gull. The only other species displaying an underwing pattern similar to the mystery photo would be a Cory's Shearwater; however, the obvious white rump, the wing posture, and the fact that the bird is not over the ocean should remove that species as a viable candidate.

The Northern Harrier is a scarce and declining coastal breeder in Massachusetts, although it is a fairly common migrant and wintering species, both along the coast and in inland areas where large fields or marshlands still exist. David Larson captured the image of the male harrier in the picture in Newburyport. *Wayne R. Petersen*



NORTHERN HARRIER ADULT MALE BY GEORGE C. WEST

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Can you identify this bird?

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



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