

# AT A GLANCE

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December 2004



DAVID LARSON

Another streaky brown job! While this is unequivocally a valid impression, a more sophisticated examination reveals a stout, thick-based, bill and a finely streaked breast with the streaks coalescing slightly into a spot in the center. These are classic hallmarks of a sparrow of some sort. However, before proceeding further down the “sparrow path,” consider what alternatives might exist. There are some other good candidates that share at least some of the basic features and characteristics of the mystery bird (e.g., Dickcissel, female Lark Bunting, and female Bobolink). Let us try to eliminate these species before thinking more seriously about sparrows.

An immature Dickcissel looks a lot like the bird in the photograph; however, a Dickcissel would typically exhibit a long and fairly prominent supercilium, would not normally show a coalescence of streaking into a breast spot, and would never have the pale eye ring possessed by the mystery bird. If the image were printed in color, the breast would also normally show at least a trace of yellow if the bird was a Dickcissel. Female Lark Bunting can be eliminated in that this species would appear significantly more heavily streaked on the underparts and the malar streaks would be correspondingly thicker and darker. A female or immature Bobolink would normally be clear-breasted, with the ventral streaks confined only to the sides and flanks. Also,

the prominent malar stripes on the pictured bird would be lacking in a female Bobolink.

Having thus eliminated at least three viable identification candidates, it is time to consider some sort of sparrow for the identity of the mystery species. Knowing that adult sparrows can generally be separated into those having clear breasts and those with streaked breasts, it is obvious that the mystery bird clearly belongs in the latter category. With this distinction in mind, other features become more critical. Clearly the pale (white?) eye ring is noticeable, as are the distinct white stripes below the dusky cheeks. Despite the fact that the photo fails to show the definitive white outer tail feathers, when these features are combined with the fine breast streaks, the choice is essentially unambiguous – the mystery bird is a Vesper Sparrow (*Poocetes gramineus*).

Vesper Sparrows are very uncommon and declining breeding birds in rough pastures, potato fields, and coastal heathlands at widely scattered localities throughout Massachusetts. As migrants they are uncommon in open, sparsely vegetated habitats, rarely occurring in winter. David Larson digitally captured this image of a Vesper Sparrow on a blueberry barren in Washington County, Maine. 🐦

Wayne R. Petersen



This photograph was taken at the height of the blizzard of January 23, 2005. This pair of Northern Flickers rested on the sheltered side of an oak tree in Cambridge. The photograph is by Tom McCorkle.

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ROGER S. EVERETT

Can you identify this bird?

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

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## Mass Audubon, in Partnership with the Menotomy Bird Club, Announces the 13th Massachusetts Birders Meeting

**When?** March 5, 2005

**Where?** Bentley College, Waltham

Please join us in March for a day of presentations, workshops, and exhibits.



Our keynote speaker will be Scott Weidensaul, author of *The Ghost with Trembling Wings*. Also presenting will be Phillip Hoose, author of the recently published *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*.

Workshops on bird identification, eBirding, and more!

Information and registration forms are available online at <http://www.massaudubon.org/> or e-mail Ellen Garcia at [egarcia@massaudubon.org](mailto:egarcia@massaudubon.org).