



This photograph of a small bird captured for banding appeared first on the rear cover of the August *C.B.* Can you identify the bird?

## Answer to Snap Judgment 4

KENN KAUFMAN

When we first showed this photo to our “unofficial advisory board” of warbler devotees, it drew an interesting mixed response. Some of these birders identified the bird almost immediately on the basis of an unanalyzed first impression. Others, no less knowledgeable, attacked the problem by analyzing this bird point by point, and this approach took them through a much longer and more circuitous route before they arrived at the correct identification. Our readers, no doubt, varied as much in their reactions to this photo. For the sake of completeness, this answer is based on the latter approach, the step-by-step analysis.

For starters, the bird is a warbler. This identification to family is as much a matter of elimination as anything else. The small size (as determined by comparison to the normal-sized human hand in the picture) and general aspect of the bill immediately narrow the choice down to within a few families of insectivorous passerines. After some obviously poor candidates have been weeded out, the vireos and warblers remain. The impression of a rather robust body and heavy bill might lead one to entertain thoughts of a vireo momentarily, but a second look will reveal that the bill is all wrong: it tapers to a hard point; a typical vireo bill seen in profile would appear more parallel-edged near the base, with the upper ridge (culmen) curving strongly near the tip to create a slight hook. So the bird in question here must be a warbler — and a rather plain, unmarked one, especially as viewed in black and white. We will have to make the most of each visible character.

It is my instinctive reaction, on first glance at a warbler, to look immediately at the wings — because the *wing-pattern* provides a rapid and broad division of the family, a first major step in the narrowing-down process. As a general rule (subject to many exceptions), warblers belonging to most genera have unpatterned wings, while most members of the popular genus *Dendroica* show wing-bars. Some examples of the latter are really striking: the western birder, hunting fall vagrants, often feels a quickening of pulse on glimpsing the bold black-and-white wing that denotes a Bay-breasted *D. castanea*, Blackpoll *D. striata*, Blackburnian *D. fusca* or some other eastern warbler.

However, the wing-pattern of the warbler in the photograph certainly does not fit into this category. There are two broad, well-defined wingbars — but they do not contrast at all strongly with the ground color of the wings; seen in monochrome, they appear medium gray against a slightly darker gray. This seemingly nondescript pattern is in fact a good clue to the bird's identity, since it is shared by few warbler species. The only North American warblers likely to duplicate the wing-bar pattern shown here are Golden-winged *Vermivora chrysoptera*, Yellow *Dendroica petechia*, Prairie *D. discolor* and Palm *D. palmarum* warblers, and perhaps Cape May Warbler *D. tigrina* and the juvenile Chestnut-sided Warbler *D. pensylvanica*.

Having narrowed the choice down this far, we may look for specific characters to rule out members of this group. The Golden-winged is rather easily eliminated because, even in its dullest plumages, the outlines of the dark throat and auricular patches should be discernible. The ill-defined but distinct dark line before and behind the eye rules out both Yellow and immature Chestnut-sided warblers, since both have a very pale area surrounding the eye, imparting a "surprised" or "wide-eyed" look. The Cape May is ruled out by the pale area below and behind the eye, and by structural characters (the Cape May has a finer, needle-tipped bill, and a shorter tail). Palm Warbler is more difficult to eliminate. However, one would expect a Palm to show a longer superciliary, more sharply set off by a darker crown. The pattern of the auriculars is also distinctly odd for Palm Warbler: the pale area below the eye is quite large, and it fades out gradually rearward, but the forward edges of the auricular patch are traced by a distinct dark stripe — the darkest feathers on the entire head.

Actually — as many readers may have noticed in an unanalyzed first impression — the odd dark stripes on the face of this bird duplicate, in shadowy form, the unique black face-pattern of the breeding-plumaged adult male **Prairie Warbler**, and this is the key to the bird's identity. This individual, probably a first-autumn immature male, was photographed by Elisabeth W. Phinney on Appledore Island, New Hampshire, in early autumn 1976.