

Identification Aid
Mourning vs. Connecticut Warblers
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In spring and fall, identification of mourning warblers (Oporornis philadelphia) and Connecticut warblers (O. agilis) is normally an exercise in frustration. Their stealth habits and obsession for dense undergrowth allows only fleeting glimpses of two similar species. Inadequate and inaccurate descriptions in the popular field guides increase the likelihood for misidentification, particularly in the fall. This article will discuss identification of these species during both migrations and will conclude with comments on identification of vagrant MacGillivray's warblers (O. tolmiei) in the east.

Several recent studies have shown a greater degree of variability in the mourning warbler plumage than is indicated in current field guides. In particular, adult and immature mourning warblers may have complete or incomplete eye rings although this is generally true of immature birds in the fall (Lanyon and Bull, 1967). Adult male mournings show much variation in coloration of the lores and the black "apron" (Hall, 1979). On the other hand, Connecticut's always have complete eye rings while their plumages are relatively uniform.

For field identifications, the first step is to determine the sex and age of the bird from its plumage. The significant field marks for this determination are discussed below and require a good look at the complete bird. The sequence of plumages is similar in both species. Adult plumages do not change between spring and fall. Immatures are distinctly different from adults in the fall. They undergo a prenuptial molt and are similar to the adults in the spring. If an individual bird cannot be aged or sexed with certainty, then it cannot be identified to species. All birds in the hand can be identified to species by the wing and tail characteristics described by Lanyon and Bull (1967).

Adult Males

Adult males are adequately described in the popular field guides as well as the characteristics to distinguish between the two species. I will not reiterate these characteristics here. However, contrary to the field guides, approximately five percent of adult male mourning warblers have incomplete (or occasionally complete) eye rings in the spring (Hall, 1979; Lanyon and Bull, 1967). Hence, these species should not be separated solely by the presence or absence of an eye ring but by a combination of all characteristics.

Adult Females

Females of both species are similar and differ from male mournings by the absence of a black "apron". They can be distinguished from male Connecticut's by a more olive back and wings and paler gray throat and upper breast. Females normally have whitish-gray throats while males have pure gray throats.

An even higher proportion of female mournings have incomplete (or complete) eye rings. To distinguish between the two species, any female without an eye ring or with an incomplete eye ring is a mourning. Any female with complete eye rings cannot be identified to species solely on the basis of this characteristic. Female Connecticut's cannot be safely identified by eye ring characteristics at any season. Note: birds may have one complete and one incomplete eye ring. These birds are mournings as both eye rings of all Connecticut's are complete.

For observers who have banded many Connecticut's or have extensive field experience with this species, there are several subjective characteristics that

may be useful for identifying Connecticut in any plumage. The Connecticut is slightly larger than a mourning but has a relatively shorter tail. This short tail creates the impression of a more robust body shape for the Connecticut. The Connecticut also has a larger and broader bill. Body shape and bill size are most reliable when direct comparisons between the two species are possible. Female Connecticut frequently have a brownish cast to their hoods while mournings are normally grayish. However, some female Connecticut have grayish hoods like mournings.

Length of the under tail coverts is also a good field mark (Godfrey, 1966). These coverts extend nearly to the end of the tail on the Connecticut but extend only to the middle of the tail on the mournings. To accurately distinguish between the two species, these coverts must be seen from below, not from the side. Hence, they are usually of little use in field identification of these species.

Immatures

Immatures differ from females by having dull brownish-green backs and a less well defined hood pattern. In some instances, the hood pattern may be so obscure that the birds are hardly recognizable as mournings or Connecticut except by their stealth habits.

In this plumage, the majority of mournings have complete or incomplete eye rings. While any bird lacking an eye ring or with an incomplete eye ring is a mourning, birds with complete eye rings cannot be identified by this characteristic.

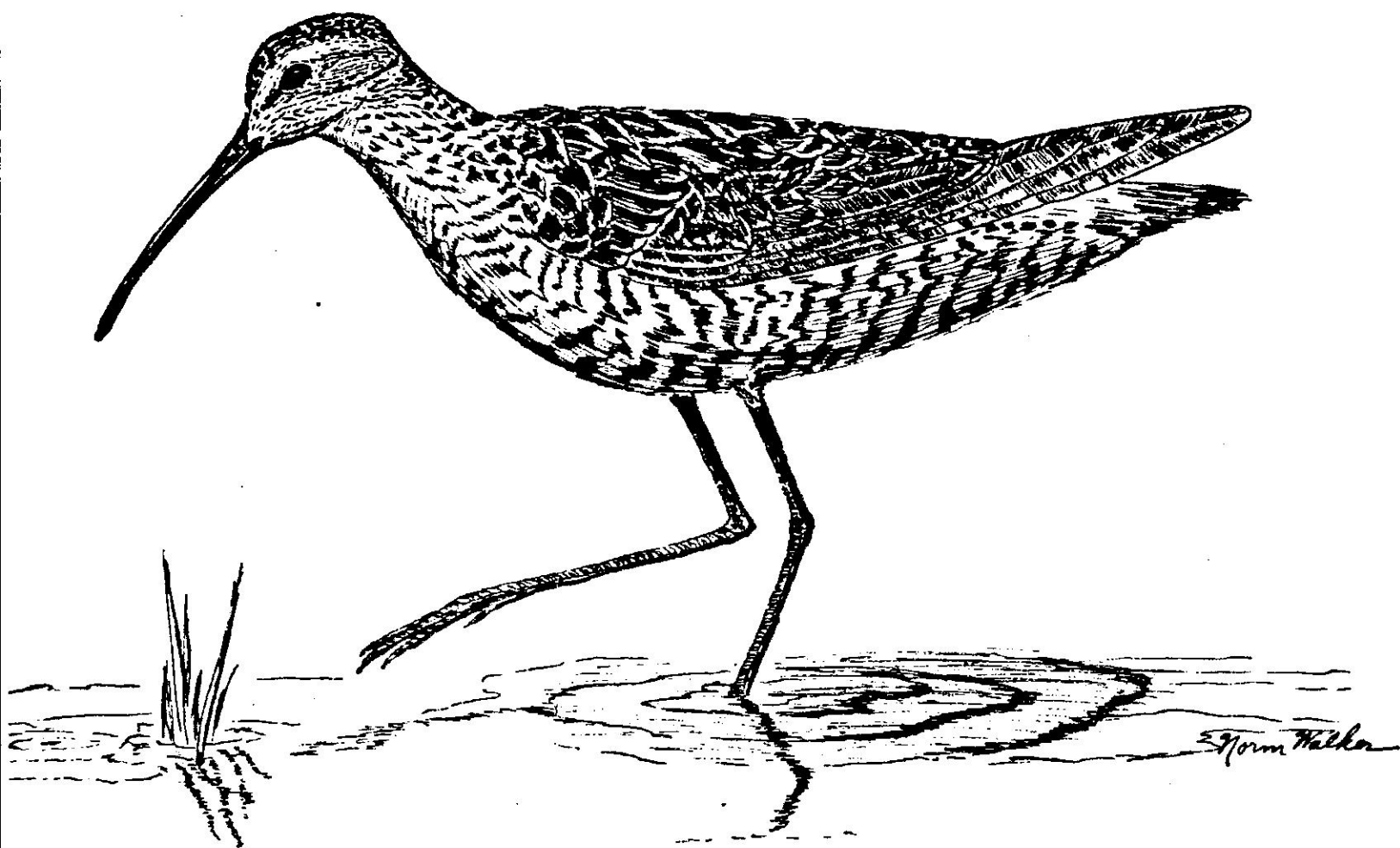
Other characteristics may be helpful for identification of birds with complete eye rings. The previously discussed differences in body shape, tail length, bill size and under tail covert length may be useful when direct comparisons are possible. Differences in the hood pattern may be diagnostic although much individual variation exists and this characteristic should be used with caution. Connecticut are said to have relatively well defined hoods that are distinctly differentiated from the yellow breast (Roberts, 1932). These hoods are more olive-brown than those of adult female Connecticut. Mournings normally have only a suggestion of a hood on the upper breast. On some immature males, the upper breast may have some blackish and the birds can be identified by this characteristic. On females and some males, the upper breast is a brownish gray. The throat is white or yellow on all immatures. This hood pattern is not clearly differentiated from the yellow breast. However, the mourning's hood pattern results from the coloration of the feather tips. As the season progresses, the feather tips wear away and the hood becomes more distinct and may be similar to that of an immature Connecticut.

With these facts in mind, several comments are in order on the identification of MacGillivray's warblers in the east. Female and immature MacGillivray's are indistinguishable from mournings and cannot be identified in the field. For adult male MacGillivray's, field guides emphasize several characteristics that have recently been shown to be inaccurate. As previously stated, a small number of adult male mournings have incomplete eye rings as do all male MacGillivrays. While the lores are supposed to be black in MacGillivrays and gray in mournings, many mournings have black lores (Hall, 1979). While the black "apron" is supposed to be sharply defined in mournings and mottled gray and black in MacGillivrays, many mournings have mottled "aprons" (Hall, 1979). Hence, there are no plumage characteristics that absolutely distinguish between these two species. Differences in songs are said to be slight and require familiarity with both species. Adult male MacGillivrays cannot be accurately identified in the field in the east.

For birds in the hand, wing and tail lengths are normally diagnostic although a small proportion of immature birds cannot be identified by these characteristics (See Lanyon and Bull, 1967).

Literature Cited

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