

# Identifying Streak-backed Orioles: a note of caution

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THE STREAK-BACKED ORIOLE (*Icterus pustulatus*), resident from northwestern Mexico to Costa Rica, is a rare visitor to the southwestern United States. The most recent distributional works accept six records for California (Garrett and Dunn 1981), and about thirteen records (involving up to eighteen individuals) for Arizona (Monson and Phillips 1981). However, some of the published Arizona records have recently proven to be incorrect; and the original errors were caused by an identification problem that is not addressed in any current bird guide.

Female-plumaged Streak-backed Orioles are known to be confusingly similar to female-plumaged "Bullcock's" Orioles (*Icterus galbula bullockii*), a problem discussed by Phillips *et al.* (1964). But identification of obvious male Streak-backed has been considered relatively simple. The only similar bird in Arizona or California is the adult male Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus*); many birders, believing that the Hooded always has a solidly black upper back, have assumed that the two can be separated at a glance by their back patterns.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. In winter, the adult male Hooded has its black back feathers extensively edged with tan or buff, often creating a pattern of black spotting or streaking on a tan background. Because the Hooded Oriole is rare in the United States in winter, this plumage is unfamiliar to most birders; and as a result, adult male Hoodeds wintering in Arizona have been misidentified as Streak-backed Orioles by a number of observers.

Major field marks for separating adult male Streak-backed and Hooded orioles are summarized below. Because the plumage sequences in these birds are perhaps not fully understood, I use the term "adult male" loosely for any individual with a black tail. Comments on Hooded Orioles here apply

only to the U.S. populations, and comments on Streak-backed Orioles apply to *I. p. microstictus* of western Mexico, the only race that is at all likely to reach the United States on its own. I should point out that the illustration of Streak-backed in the Mexican field guide (Peterson and Chalif 1973), which birders are most likely to use for reference, does not depict this subspecies.

## FIELD MARKS

1. **Bill shape.** Bills of either species might be thought of as "curved" by some observers; but the *culmen* (upper ridge of upper mandible) is virtually straight in Streak-backed Oriole, and gently but distinctly curved in Hooded Oriole.

2. **Malar pattern.** The malar region of the face—the tract of feathers that extends back from the base of the lower mandible—is mostly or entirely black in Hooded Oriole. In Streak-backed Oriole, this tract of feathers is black only in a limited area at the base, *i.e.* immediately adjacent to the base of the lower mandible; the rest of the malar region is orange. This creates a very different overall face pattern.

3. **Head color.** It seems consistently true that any Streak-backed Oriole with a black tail will have some bright color on the head: a shade of orange that is richer than that of the underparts. This color, usually most intense just behind the black mask in the malar region (giving the bird its former name of "Scarlet-headed Oriole"). Hooded Oriole does not duplicate this effect.

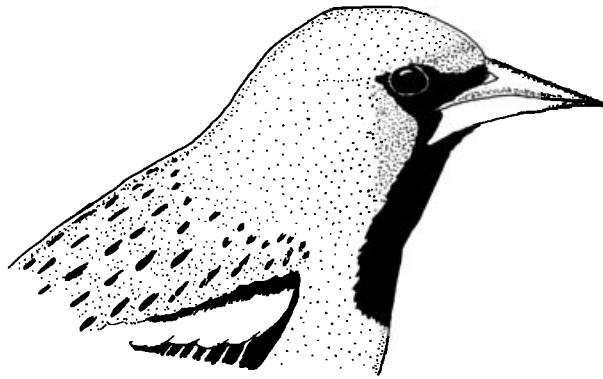
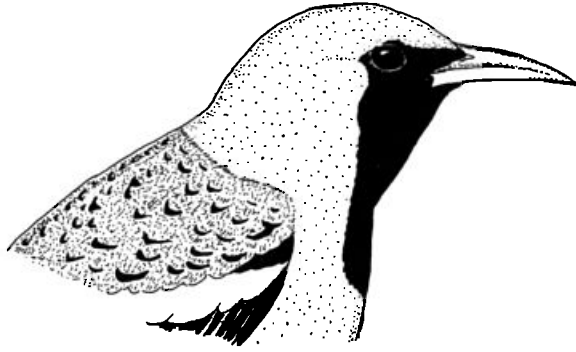
4. **Back pattern.** The back feathers of the two species are marked quite differently. Details of these individual feathers can be discerned only under the best conditions, of course, but the general patterns that they create are often evident in the field.

Hooded Orioles undergo a complete molt in fall; by November, most are in very fresh plumage. At this time the black back feathers are broadly tipped with brown, tan, or buff, usually with an olive tinge. These pale tips may obscure most of the black at first, the visible black taking the form of irregular latitudinal barring, scalloping, or spotting. During the winter, normal wear on the plumage gradually reduces the pale edgings and thus increases the amount of visible black; by late winter the back may appear largely black with narrow buffy barring or scaling. Finally the pale edgings wear away entirely, leaving the plain black back of summer plumage.

On adult male Streak-backed Orioles (race *microstictus*), each back feather is mostly orange-yellow. Many of these feathers have single, sharply defined, longitudinal black streaks down their centers. This species also molts in fall; fresh-plumaged birds in early winter have many of the back feathers tipped with white or pale gray. This may give the back a "veiled" or "frosted" appearance, but the basic pattern—yellow-orange with narrow black streaks—remains evident.

5. **Nape/back contrast.** Hooded Orioles, even when they are in very fresh plumage with little black visible on the back, show an obvious line of demarcation between the yellow-orange nape and the tan or brown back. On Streak-backed Orioles the ground color of the back is virtually the same as that of the nape, so there is no apparent line of contrast.

6. **Size and shape.** Observers familiar with one or both species may notice that the Streak-backed Oriole is a slightly larger and bulkier bird, with a proportionately larger head. The Hooded Oriole, by comparison, looks slim and small-headed.



Adult male orioles in early winter, actual size. Above: Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus nelsoni*). Below: Streak-backed Oriole (*Icterus pustulatus microstictus*). Drawing/ Kenn Kaufman.

**7. Wing and tail patterns.** Many birders believe that Streak-backed Orioles show more white in the wings than Hooded Orioles. This may be true to some extent when birds in exactly the same state of wear are compared. However, both species have extensive white edgings to the tertials, secondaries, and primaries when in fresh plumage, and in both species the amount of white is gradually reduced through wear; birders accustomed to seeing Hooded Ori-

oles in summer may be misled by the large amount of white in their wings in winter. Similarly, both species in fresh plumage have narrow white tips to most of the outer tail feathers.

#### DISCUSSION

**B**IRDERS WHO HAVE entered on their lists as Streak-backed Orioles may not be pleased by this revelation.

This case is, at least, an educational one. Not only does it clarify some points about the two species involved, it also underscores three principles that should be considered basic to field identification:

1. No species—in particular, no rare species—should ever be identified on the basis of just one field mark.
2. Plumage sequences, molt and wear have major effects on a bird's appearance. They should always be considered in problem identifications.
3. The birder who wishes to identify rarities should begin by developing a thorough and comprehensive familiarity with the common birds.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**I** AM GRATEFUL to Margaret Chalif, Douglas Stotz, William A. Davis, Rick Bowers, Sherman Suter, and Sharon Goldwasser for useful discussions on this subject, and to Dr. Stephen M. Russell for access to specimens at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Additional specimens were sent from Louisiana State University for comparison. Gale Monson read the manuscript and suggested several improvements.

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