

# The Practiced Eye

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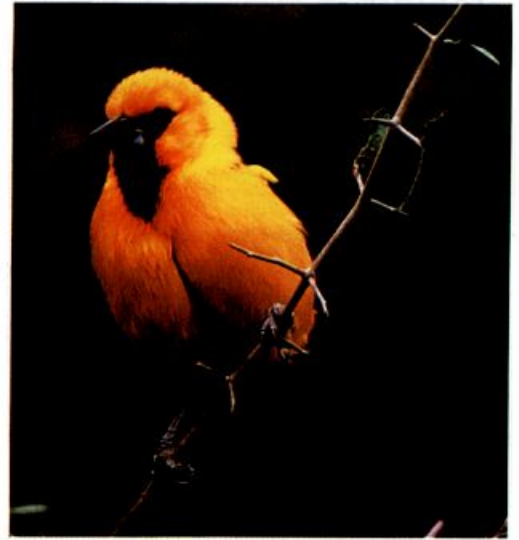
**Photographs from VIREO**

## Notes on female orioles

**B**IRDERS VISITING SOUTHERN TEXAS FOR THE FIRST TIME MAY BE SURPRISED to note that in two of the “specialty” orioles of that region—Altamira Oriole (*Icterus gularis*) and Audubon’s Oriole (*I. graduacauda*)—the sexes are patterned alike. This is actually the normal situation for Neotropical orioles, in which the females almost always wear the same bright patterns as the males. North of the tropics, female orioles take on more subtle tones, and separating different species can provide a challenge for the observer.

In the eastern half of the continent, where only two oriole species regularly occur, the challenge is minimal. Female Northern Orioles from eastern North America—“Baltimore” Orioles (*I. galbula galbula*)—tend to be more colorful overall than female Orchard Orioles (*I. spurius*). The Northern is washed with bright orange on the breast, fading to yellowish on the belly and on the chin. It almost always shows more contrast around the face, with dark ear-coverts set off from the paler throat, and fully adult females usually have blackish mottling around the head. The tail of the female Northern shows an odd color, often more conspicuous in flight, which might be described as a dull bronzy-orange.

The female Orchard Oriole is much more uniform. Its tail is dull greenish, its underparts are entirely pale greenish-yellow, and on the face this color fades evenly into the dull olive of the crown. (The subadult male Orchard Oriole looks like this, except for a sharply-defined patch of black on the face and throat.)



Adult Altamira Oriole (sexes alike). Photo: R. Martin Smith/VIREO (s26/1/002)



Female Northern (“Baltimore”) Oriole. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/9/066)

The Orchard Oriole also has a smaller bill than the Northern, and averages smaller in overall size. Once on a field trip in Florida, I found a dead female Orchard Oriole on the lawn, and passed it around as a quiz bird. Most of the group guessed it to be a warbler. This species really is quite small.



Female Orchard Oriole. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/6/175)



Female Scott's Oriole. Photo: Dale & Marian Zimmerman/VIREO (z01/8/045)

In western North America, with more species to choose from, identification becomes more complicated.

Scott's Oriole (*I. parisorum*) is a chunky, heavy-bodied species with a rather thick, straight bill. The female tends to be darker than the females of most other orioles. It wears tones of deep olive-yellow, and is extensively washed with dusky olive on the sides and head. When it is fully adult, it has quite a bit of blackish mottling on the face and throat, and may appear mostly black-headed.



Female Hooded Oriole. Photo: Dale & Marian Zimmerman/VIREO (z01/7/052)

The female Hooded Oriole (*I. cucullatus*) is a slightly smaller and slimmer bird that looks proportionately longer-tailed. Its bill shape is noticeably different from that of Scott's, being quite long, thin, and decurved (especially in the western part of its range; Hoodeds in Texas are not quite so long-billed). It is also paler and more evenly yellow than Scott's, although most female Hoodeds are not as whitish on the underparts as the bird in this photograph.

Female Northern Orioles from the West—"Bullock's" Orioles (*I. g. bullockii*)—tend to be very white on the lower breast and belly, with a yellow wash only on the upper breast. The extensive white and the relatively straight bill are enough to separate them from the other western orioles.

In terms of overall color, the bird most similar to the female Hooded Oriole is the female Orchard Oriole. But in the West, can the latter species be ruled out on the basis of range? Not necessarily: Orchard Orioles, like other migratory species, do stray off course at times. The size difference between Hooded and Orchard orioles is not obvious without a direct comparison, but their proportions also differ, with Orchard having a shorter tail and a straighter, shorter bill. Expressed in dry figures, these differences would be only a few millimeters; but the resulting differences in *shape* will be readily apparent to the practiced eye



Female Orchard Oriole. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/6/172)

VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientifically-curated collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds well over 80,000 images, representing over one-third of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May-June 1984.