

IDENTIFICATION QUIZ



What important clues do we have to identify this—or any other—raptor to species? The three most important characteristics to note on a flying raptor are silhouette, flight mannerisms, and plumage pattern. Size is relative and not useful in identifying many birds, including the one in this photograph. Color can be useful but is not so here or, often, in the field. Complicating evaluation of silhouette and flight mannerisms are other factors such as environmental conditions, social and foraging behavior, and molt. For example, the relatively rounded wing tips of buteos or accipiters can appear pointed and falcon-like when a bird is sailing along a windy ridge or diving. Conversely, some pointed-winged raptors, such as falcons, often appear blunter-winged than usual when soaring on thermals. Compounding identification of our bird is the fact that the outer primaries are growing, thus giving the wing tip a rounder shape than usual.

Given that the primaries are growing, our first impression of the bird in this photograph is a deceptive one. Soaring with widely spread wings and tail, the

bird presents a silhouette somewhat intermediate between a buteo and a soaring falcon. The partial side view accentuates the width of the wings. Plumage details, particularly wing and tail patterns, are very useful, especially when silhouette and flight characteristics are deceptive. Buteos with similar tail patterns, such as Broad-winged and Gray hawks (*Buteo platypterus* and *nitidus*), are chunkier-bodied with relatively shorter, broader and, from beneath, paler wings. The bird is vaguely reminiscent of a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) but is too broad in the wing and has unbarred grayish remiges rather than the Merlin's strongly barred remiges. An immature Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) is strongly suggested by our bird's wing shape and pale wing linings, but is eliminated from consideration by the bold, dark-and-light banding on the tail and the unbarred remiges. All accipiters have darker heads and relatively shorter, more rounded wings with strongly barred remiges.

The bird in this photograph is a Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*). The long, notched tail characteristic of the species does not show here, and the wings appear abnormally wide because of molt, soaring behavior, and angle of view. Why then is it a Mississippi Kite? The somewhat falcon-like profile, unbarred remiges, streaked underparts contrasting with white throat, and the conspicuous, even-width, light-and-dark tail bands all indicate the immature plumage of Mississippi Kite. The bird also has a very pale head contrasting with dark lores and supraorbital area. A little known and possibly distinctive feature of the immature Mississippi Kite, shown well in the photograph, is the tendency for many (all?) birds of this age to have a dusky—even all gray—subterminal pale tail band contrasting with the whiter proximal bands. This barred tail is seen to varying degrees in second-year birds, which, however, have unstreaked grayish underparts and thus more closely resemble the adult plumage.

I photographed this immature kite in August 1980, as it soared high overhead pursuing insects above the city park at Lamar, Colorado, site of a large communal nesting area, where adults, subadults and immatures can be observed.

Tim Manolis and Laurence C. Binford provided valuable comments on the content of this note. I appreciate their time and effort.

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