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Birding by Gestalt

The “amateur” birding literature has become increasingly technical and refined in recent years. Our understanding of the details of feather patterns is now amazingly well-documented and described, and in-depth discussions about all the intricacies of feather details are now commonplace on various internet forums. In large part, this explosion of knowledge has been facilitated by the affordability of digital cameras and the popularity of digiscoping. The advantage of these technological advancements is that rare birds or tricky IDs can often be scrutinized electronically in incredible detail by people all over the world without even having to see the actual bird in the field. However, this development has also led to the proliferation of “armchair” birding and to a decreasing appreciation of the value of honing one’s identification skills in the field.

We believe that field identification must be anchored to hard facts, that is, the intricacies and details of feather patterns, measurements, etc. However, in practice, many of these detailed field marks are difficult to quantify exactly in the field. When taken together, these features are manifested as distinct overall impressions in shape, posture, and behavior, collectively called “gestalt.” Gestalt is difficult to quantify in field guides or photographs and therefore is not often taken seriously as a “hard” approach to field identification. More often than not, though, when an experienced birder finds a rare bird, it

is because he or she noticed a bird that had a distinctive gestalt, causing it to be scrutinized in greater detail.

Highly experienced birders have honed their gestalt birding skills to the point that certain bird species historically considered almost unidentifiable can now be identified. Even without binoculars, gestalt can be used to detect rare or unusual birds for further study. Examples include picking out the odd swallow from a flock, or the odd dowitcher; scrutinizing shorebirds, *Empidonax* flycatchers, and sparrows; and our current focus, wood-pewees.

Gestalt birding is most effective—and this surprises some people—with beginning birders. Learning how to pick out the common species without the use of binoculars



can be exhilarating and empowering. It is not as difficult as it looks.

We have embarked on a series of articles focused on gestalt identification. Our motivation is to simplify technical details by showing that all of these details can be encompassed in just a few gestalt characteristics. Thus, we hope to achieve two goals. The first is to communicate how gestalt field marks can be used by beginners and experts, and the second is to explain what features control gestalt for those who are actually interested in the details. In this issue of *Birding*, we focus on wood-pewees as an example of a notoriously difficult identification pair—but a case in which gestalt birding can help. In short, the relative contrasts of the wingbars, relative tail length, tail posture, and relative contrast between underparts and upperparts are the features that one can use to aid in the identification of wood-pewees. Previous articles by us in *Birding* that have examined gestalt birding have looked at such taxa as Arctic/Pacific Loons, female Bullock's/Baltimore Orioles, and most recently dowitchers. We hope other birders will push the limits of gestalt birding.

The Cover Photo

This composite image highlights some of the challenges involved in the notorious wood-pewee pair in North America. No one field mark is probably sufficient for certain identification of either the upper bird (Eastern Wood-Pewee) or the lower bird (Western Wood-Pewee). But see if you can apply the holistic and gestalt methods advanced in the main text article (pp. 34–40) to identify these two wood-pewees.

It is natural to start off with color. The Eastern Wood-Pewee is more extensively orange on the lower mandible, and it is slightly paler overall. The Western Wood-Pewee, in contrast, shows reduced orange on the lower mandible, and it is more dusky overall. Always be vigilant about overreliance on characters involving color. In addition to intrinsic variation in characters involving color, there are

tricky effects of lighting and wear.

Often more important than color is pattern. One potentially important field mark discussed in detail in the main print article involves the pattern of the wing bars. In particular, the wing bars of Eastern Wood-Pewee tend to be of relatively even brightness and contrast. In Western Wood-Pewee, in contrast, the upper wing bar is usually not as bright or as contrasting as the lower wing bar.

Especially important in the identification process is body shape. A special focus in our article is on the ratio of “primary extension” to “tail extension” (PE/TE). This ratio averages greater on Western Wood-Pewee than on Eastern. In a related vein, Western Wood-Pewee is more likely than Eastern to hold its tail in an angle that is perfectly straight with the body. Although subtle by themselves, PE/TE and tail angle combine to give Eastern Wood-Pewee a more *Empidonax*-like look than is the case for Western Wood-Pewee. The stronger wing bars of Eastern also contribute to this gestalt. Understanding the quantitative basis of gestalt—for example, how the *Empidonax*-like look of Eastern Wood-Pewee is created by PE/TE, tail angle, and wing bars—can greatly improve our field identification skills.

Take a good look at the wood-pewees on the cover. Notice how any particular field mark, by itself, is probably not adequate for definitive identification. Indeed, notice how one or more field marks may deviate from the idealized “average” for the species. But notice how the whole suite of field marks—color, pattern, and body shape—steer us toward the correct identification.

About the Authors:

When not out birding or on their day jobs, Cin-Ty and Andy can be found at their website <surfbirds.com>. Ted keeps himself busy with Fermata, Inc., a company dedicated to ecotourism and avitourism. Drop in to the Surfbirds forum for some spirited discussion on various North American bird ID problems, as well as for previews of our future identification articles.