

Distant Raptors

Identifying birds in photographs is very different from identifying them in the field. A photograph is a split-second representation, so wing shape and posture can appear atypical, especially

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at odd angles or in mid-flap. In the field, observers are often able to see a bird from several angles and watch its behavior before identifying it. These four raptors are difficult to identify in the poses and distances shown. My forthcoming

book, *Hawks at a Distance* (Princeton University Press), focuses on distant or difficult identification issues like the ones shown in this photo quiz.

Quiz Photo A

First off, the bird on the right is obviously an adult Bald Eagle. It is blackish overall with a pure white head and yellow bill. The bird on the left is about the same size as the adult Bald Eagle, has extremely long wings, is dark on the body, and is holding its wings slightly raised. The bird on the left appears slightly smaller than the Bald Eagle to the right. Golden Eagles are slightly smaller than Bald Eagles, on average, but there is much overlap in size between the two species, and female Golden Eagles can be considerably larger than male Bald Eagles. And since the bird on the left is slightly farther away, it looks smaller. From the size, we can see that the raptor on the left is either another eagle or a Turkey Vulture. A Turkey Vulture would show pro-

portionately shorter wings than the Bald Eagle on the right, and it would not show the pale head the bird on the left shows, so we can rule this species out.

So it appears that the bird on the left is another eagle of some sort. It seems to show a shallow dihedral and pale nape similar to a Golden Eagle. These traits are obvious, but are they accurate? Since the Bald Eagle on the right is holding its wings unevenly due to strong winds or some other factor, maybe the bird on the left is holding its wings in an odd fashion for the same reason, so let's examine other traits. The head appears both pale and dull. This doesn't seem correct for Golden Eagle; at eye level, the nape of a Golden Eagle would shine brightly in direct sunlight (as does the Bald Eagle's) and the cheeks might still appear dark. Also, many Golden Eagles show a pale leading edge to the wings, which is lacking on our bird.

Less obvious, but important to the identification of this bird, is the small white area on the inner secondaries of our bird's left wing. This is something that Golden Eagles do not show but that im-



Quiz Photo A—mid-February.

mature (non-adult) Bald Eagles do. This makes our mystery eagle with an all-dark profile and slight paleness to the head a sub-adult I (basic I) Bald Eagle. This photo alone is very difficult. Even several observers I consider “experts” had difficulty with this identification! These **Bald Eagles** were photographed by the author on 14 February 2007 at Farmington Bay Wildlife Refuge, Davis County, Utah.

Quiz Photo B

The raptor in this photo appears to have long wings, which are slim and pointed, and a relatively short tail. It is clear that the tail is reddish. There are three raptors in North America that can or do show a reddish tail: American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, and Ferruginous Hawk. Even though our bird’s wings appear long and slim, we can rule out American Kestrel due to the relatively broad, short tail, the large head, and the fact that the wing tips are flared upward (which is rarely the case with falcons).

This leaves us to decide between Red-tailed and Ferruginous Hawks. The red tail is a well-known trait of adult Red-tailed Hawks, of course, but it is a less-known trait of Ferruginous Hawks. Some adult Ferruginous Hawks have reddish in the tail mixed with gray or white, but our bird’s tail looks almost completely red. The upperwing coverts of our bird are rufous and there is a hint of a whitish wing panel along the primaries of the right wing. Some paler

adult Red-tailed Hawks show rufous along the upperwings, but never to this extent, and adult Red-tailed Hawks do not show pale primary wing panels. Of the adult buteos, only Ferruginous Hawks have white wing panels throughout the primaries and rufous along the majority of the upperwings. Rarely, Ferruginous Hawks do possess a completely red tail such as this one. This adult **Ferruginous Hawk** was photographed by the author on 7 November 2007 along the Wasatch Mountains, Salt Lake County, Utah.

Quiz Photo C

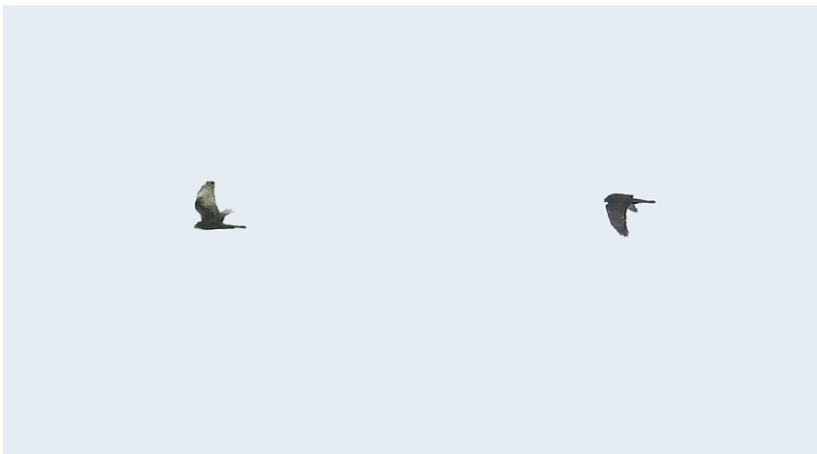
This raptor is dark underneath with paler flight feathers, and it is uniformly dark on top. Based on plumage alone, our bird could be an eagle, vulture, or dark-morph buteo. Let’s rule out eagle or vulture quickly since they show broader wings, stouter bodies, and darker remiges than our bird. This leaves us to choose among the dark buteos. Our bird’s wings and tail are fairly long and narrow for a buteo, so the most likely choice would be Rough-legged Hawk, Swainson’s Hawk, or Zone-tailed Hawk. Swainson’s Hawk has dark remiges, which our bird lacks. Adult Zone-tailed Hawk shows a white band on the top of the tail, but juveniles do not. However, our bird is much slimmer overall than a Zone-tailed Hawk, and the head appears small compared to any buteo.

In fact, our bird looks more like a Northern Harrier than a buteo, but Rough-legged Hawks often look harrier-like. And since Rough-legged Hawks have a well-known dark morph, this must be a Rough-legged Hawk, right? The adult Rough-legged Hawk has a broad, dark terminal band to the wings; so our bird must be a juvenile. But the secondaries seem darkish and the outer primaries appear banded throughout the tips. Juvenile dark Rough-legged Hawks show pale remiges throughout, and the wing tips are dark, not banded.

Could our bird be a “dark” harrier? All Northern Harriers have a white “rump” (uppertail coverts), which our bird lacks, but maybe a dark harrier would be uniformly dark on top like our bird. The most telling feature of our bird is its overall shape: long, narrow wings and tail; small head; and slim body. It fits the clas-



Quiz Photo B—early November.



Quiz Photo C—early February.

sic profile for Northern Harrier. Practiced birders are able to notice this quickly. However, most birders are unaware that dark-morph harriers exist. Ironically, this bird was in silhouette when I first saw it, so it was an easy identification in flight.

There are now three known records for North America of dark harriers, and this is the only one photographed. An adult male can be ruled out by its lack of dark wing tips and the dark terminal edge to the secondaries, but the relatively short wings and tail, the shallow dihedral, and the smaller size compared with other nearby female harriers lead me to believe it is a juvenile male. There are a few species of dark harriers worldwide, but none match this bird in shape, flight style, and plumage.

This dark-“morph” Northern Harrier was photographed by the author on 5 February 2008 at Farmington Bay Wildlife Refuge, Davis County, Utah.

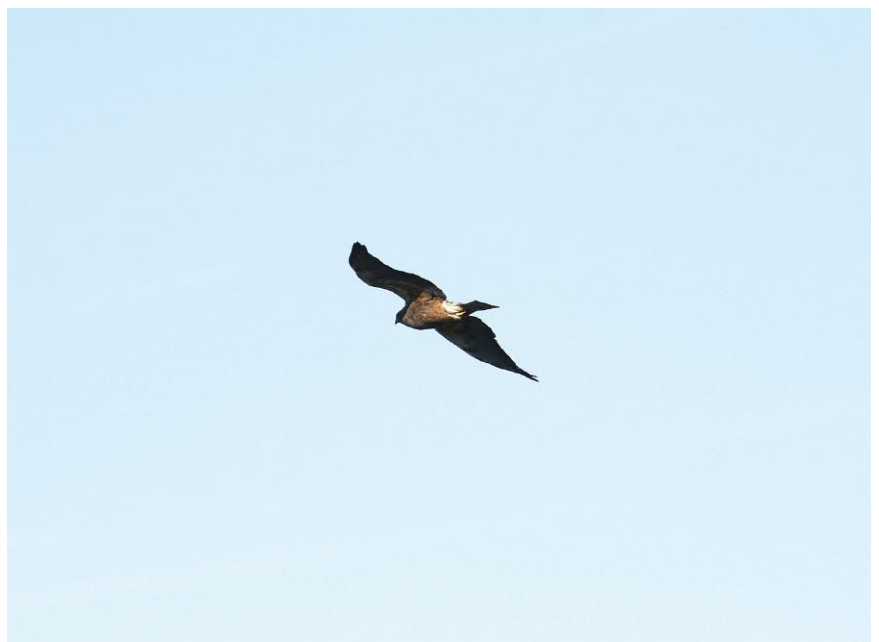
Quiz Photo D

The most notable trait on our final raptor is its dark-rufous body plumage. This matches some buteos such as Swainson’s, Red-tailed, and Ferruginous Hawks; but Hook-billed Kites, Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned, and Cooper’s Hawks can also have rufous undersides. The long, pointed wings of our bird are very different from the paddle-shaped wings of a Hook-billed Kite, and they are too broad to be the

wings of a Northern Harrier. The wings of our bird appear somewhat accipiter-like, but perhaps that is because they are pulled in instead of outstretched. Even though the tail of any bird would appear foreshortened at this angle, the tail of all accipiters is much longer than our quiz bird’s. Besides, the body is solid rufous-brown instead of the barred rufous and whitish of an accipiter—although a few Sharp-shinned Hawks can be solid rufous on the underbody.

The long, broad wings, short tail, and stout body fit the profile of a buteo, so our bird must be a dark-morph Swainson’s, Red-tailed, or Ferruginous Hawk. On dark Red-tailed and

Ferruginous Hawks, the undertail coverts are dark as well, but on dark Swainson’s Hawks, they are pale. So, this would have been an easy way to distinguish our buteo at first glance. If we look closely, the inner secondaries of the left wing are dark as on Swainson’s Hawks, and they are not shadowed like the rest of the underwing. Also, the “hands”



Quiz Photo D—mid-September.

of our bird are slightly narrower than those of Red-tailed and Ferruginous Hawks. This adult (rufous-colored) dark-morph Swainson’s Hawk was photographed by the author on 18 September 2007 along the Wasatch Mountains in Salt Lake County, Utah.