

November Photo Quiz Answers—WebExtra

Color. We take it for granted. But is color the be-all-and-end-all of bird identification? Gradually the realization is dawning that using color and patterns is often a slow, tedious way to identify birds, not the simple way we supposed. Even in families in which the overall shape is similar, the nitty-gritty details of structure are sufficient to identify individual species surprisingly often. Also, as Ken Behrens notes in his analysis of the third quiz photo, an added benefit of using structure in field identification is that structural characteristics tend to vary much less by age and sex than do color- and pattern-based field marks.

With this in mind, we provide a quiz without color in hopes that the exercise will help readers gain additional insight into the value of structure in identification. Following our recent model in which quiz authors have no prior knowledge of the answers, Kimball Garrett gamely agreed to provide his analyses of these three silhouettes, which were published in the January 2010 *Birding*. Garrett's answers are sprinkled with useful tidbits and are well worth the time to read carefully. In his introduction, he aptly notes how field guides do an excellent job of drawing our attention to "macro" aspects of structure but tend to be less in tune with the more nuanced clues used to answer this quiz. For each photo, he quickly puts the bird into the correct taxonomic grouping using just the silhouette. I expect he is not alone in this feat. Likely many readers were able to do the same thing, suggesting that, whether we realize it or not, structure plays an important role in the identification process for all of us. Then, in what has become a repeated theme in this new style of photo quiz, Garrett immediately uses the date and location information provided to whittle down the list of suspects to a bare number of possibilities. Once these two steps have been taken, a quiz that was deemed "impossible" by some of the technical reviewers of *Birding* suddenly becomes doable. Garrett gets two out of three correct. Even the one that was incorrect, the bird in the second photo, was mostly right; he not only gets the genus correct but is correctly within the sub-group within bay ducks known as pochards. By laying the proper groundwork, Garrett sets himself up to do very well with a difficult set of photos.

Ken Behrens was the evil genius behind this photo quiz, and his take on this trio of photos is presented along with Kimball Garrett's. Unfortunately the demands of being a full-time birding guide in Africa kept him from providing his insights quickly enough to be printed in *Birding*, but we have them here. When Behrens spoke to me about doing this quiz, we knew we would have to choose the photos carefully. We started by choosing the species we wanted to include; then Behrens looked for photos that would represent each species in characteristic poses. Because, as Garrett points out, photos can be incredibly deceiving, it was crucial that Behrens chose photos showing these species accurately. I believe he succeeded at that. Behrens' answers to the quiz reflect the knowledge of someone who has made his living as a professional seawatcher at one point. As a veteran of the Avalon seawatch in Cape May, New Jersey, he brings the perspective of an expert waterbird counter. This is a significant advantage, as a waterbird counter must regularly identify distant birds by silhouette alone. The mentality is similar to that of the expert hawkwatcher but applied to a larger suite of species. For many of these waterbirds, the characteristics which set them apart at a distance are still being worked out. Much of the approach that leads to the discovery of new characteristics is found in the responses to this quiz. Enjoy this different approach to a photo quiz and consider the thought process next time a distant bird presents only a silhouette.

— Cameron Cox

As the devious mind behind this photo quiz, I suppose I should provide some justification for my belief that these silhouettes are identifiable with near certainty. When we birders think about body structure as important for bird identification, we tend to think of birds that are difficult to distinguish by plumage alone—empids, peeps, accipiters,

and so forth. For relatively "easy" taxa, though, we often ignore body structure. In the case of this photo quiz, all three birds would be easily identified if we could see the colors and patterns of their feathers and bare parts. But we can't do that here. So we need to look at structure. Can we do it? I believe we can.

Quiz Photo A

Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge, North Dakota;
29 May 2009. Photo by © Cameron Cox.

The first photo is perhaps the easiest to identify. The basic shape is obviously that of a larid, and the gulls are easily eliminated by this bird's bill, which is more narrow and pointed than any gull's bill would be. All terns basically have long, pointed wings, a cylindrical body, and a rounded head. The characters of this bird that quickly rule out a lot of tern species are its bill and tail. The bill is quite thin, and the tail is long, which removes a large set of birds from contention, leaving two likely species: Least and Black. Of course, if we had any inkling of this bird's color, we would not confuse the two species.

Although adult Least Terns are long-tailed birds, juveniles have short tails and are fairly close to the quiz bird in silhouette. But let's look again at the wings, which are broad for a tern and straight. The wings of a Least Tern are narrow and crooked, quite unlike those of this bird. Least



those of this bird. Least

Tern is also highly unlikely at Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge, whereas Black Tern is a common migrant and breeder on the pothole lakes in the region. So we can be quite confident that this is a Black Tern.

One way to arrive at this bird's identity is process of elimination, but this is not how most experienced birders would identify the bird in this photo. Basically, it just screams Black Tern. Everything about the bird is distinctive: the fine, pointed bill; the short, rounded head; the long, straight wings; the chunky body; and the short, slightly forked tail.

Something else bears mention here. Although not discernible from the photo, the flight style of the Black Tern is distinctive. It floats over the water with exaggerated, deep, fluid wingbeats that propel it up and down in a graceful, enrapturing, unmistakable manner. Even if you were in the field at dawn, watching this bird against the rising sun, the way it was flying would almost instantly tell you what it was. The only potential confusion would be with vagrant White-winged and Whiskered terns, which the location and date make highly unlikely.



Quiz Photo B

Des Lacs National Wildlife Refuge, North Dakota;
30 May 2009. Photo by © Ken Behrens.

These birds are obviously waterfowl of some kind: swans, geese, or ducks. Although the idea of seeing a Black Tern as a silhouette alone may be far-fetched, seeing waterfowl in this manner is a frequent occurrence, particularly at sea-watches where weather conditions and distance often reduce birds to nothing but shapes. I often hear birders complain about how difficult it is to identify flying ducks. Much of their frustration comes from trying to identify these birds by looking at their colors and patterns, while

ignoring structural attributes that are more indicative and easier to see at a distance.

There are two groups of ducks that are (a) generally similar to these birds and (b) likely to be in North Dakota in May: Mallard-like ducks (Mallard, American Black Duck, and Gadwall) in the genus *Anas* and “scaup” (including Ring-necked Duck and Canvasback) in the genus *Aythya*.

In the Mallard-like group, we can tell that these are not Gadwall by the length of the neck and the fairly sturdy,



conical bills. American Black Duck is rare in western North Dakota, and seeing a flock this large would be unlikely, so we can rule out that species, leaving Mallard in this group.

In the “scaup” group, there are two species that closely match the fairly big, bulky appearance of these birds: Redhead and Canvasback. Redheads typically look large-headed, with a contrastingly narrow neck. That doesn't apply to these birds, whose necks are evenly thick, without an obviously bulky head. The bills also seem like a better fit for Canvasback, sloping directly down from the forehead to the tip rather than being slightly concave as on Redhead. So Canvasback is the most likely member of the scaup group.

Canvasback and Mallard are surprisingly similar in silhouette. Again we find an identification by silhouette bringing us to a surprising juncture. Both Canvasback and Mallard are long-necked, wedge-billed, short-tailed, and sleek-bodied, with wings of moderate width. To identify the birds in the photo, we must look at subtle aspects of structure and behavior. One significant clue, which could also have helped eliminate a slew of other species, is the way the birds are flying in relation to each other. They are flying in a slanting, evenly and widely spaced line. My experience with waterfowl suggests that these birds are a little too widely spaced for Mallards. Another important piece of information is the birds' posture; they are quite horizontal, not tilted forward, as is typical in Mallard. Yet another clue is the lack of the curled-up feathers that adorn the top of a Mallard's tail. Of course, this could be a flock of young birds or females, but to see this many birds without a few curly uppertail coverts is uncommon.

At this point, we are leaning toward Canvasback, but a definitive identification rests on a number of subtle traits. One is the shape of the wings. These birds have wings of a fairly even width, characteristic of Canvasback. Mallards have wings with a broader base that taper to a sharper point. Another is the bill shape. Although Mallards have wedge-shaped bills, they are more attenuated toward the tip than Canvasback, which has an evenly wedge-shaped bill. Although these birds are distant, the bills appear more consistent with Canvasback. A final, subtle aspect that suggests Canvasback is the relation between the breast and the neck of the birds in this flock. There is an even transi-

tion from the smooth body to the smooth, fairly thick neck. Mallards and American Black Ducks tend to show a more prominent breast and a neck that is slightly thinner at its center.

Ultimately, these birds can be identified in much the same way that a skilled birder recognizes the majority of birds in the field—not by a singular piece of information but rather by a set of clues which, when perceived together, often in an instant's time, lead to a strong feeling regarding a bird's identity.

Quiz Photo C

Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario; 23 April 2009.

Photo by © Ken Behrens.

This identification promises to be the hardest of the three, and some readers may find the notion of identifying a gull by silhouette alone to be sheer madness. I would suggest that cutting through the endless variability of gull plumages and looking at their structure is a quick way of eliminating many similar species. In some instances, the method can tell you what a bird is without ever worrying about whether it is a first-alternate this or a third-cycle that.

Lake Ontario is a hotbed of larid activity in winter, although by late April most of the less common species have departed for distant breeding grounds, leaving mainly Ring-billed and Herring gulls. Let's look at these two most common and likely species to see if either is a good fit.

Herring Gull can closely approach this silhouette. Two subtle things suggest that this silhouette does not belong to a Herring: the fairly short bill and the narrow wings. Herring averages slightly longer billed and broader winged than this bird. Also, our mystery bird doesn't give the impression of a gull as bulky as a Herring Gull, although, admittedly, the species can be highly variable in size and structure.

What about Ring-billed? The quiz bird's head is short, fairly large, and rounded. With the fairly short, chunky bill, the front end of the bird gives a pigeon-like impression that is characteristic of Ring-billed Gull. The wings also impart something distinctively “Ring-billed.” The front of the “arm” curves up to the elbow, where there is a rounded point. Although gulls are able to adopt a baffling array of

flight styles, and are capable of adapting to almost all wind conditions, there is a good probability that a mid-sized gull displaying this curvaceous look to the front of the wing is a Ring-billed Gull.

As with the previous quiz photo, there is no single trait of this bird that makes it undeniably a Ring-billed Gull, but its features strongly suggest that species. Of course, any single photo can be deceptive. Even a series of photos gives you little information about how a bird was hopping, flying, feeding, or otherwise behaving—information that often identifies a bird instantly. Would it be possible to take a photo of another gull species with the identical silhouette? Probably. But I would also contend that, if you were to comb the photo libraries of 1,000s of photographers for photos that would create exactly this silhouette, 99 out of

100 of them would be Ring-billed Gulls. Given that most identification rests on probabilities rather than certainties, 99% isn't bad.

Ken Behrens

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Currently based in Cape Town, South Africa, **KB** guides tours all over Africa for Tropical Birding. He is working on two book projects at the moment: a seawatching guide and a site guide to Ethiopia. He has birded from the Amazon of Bolivia to the mountains of Rwanda to the Cape May seawatch.

