

Little Brown (and Yellow) Jobs at Cape May

Our quizmasters this time are Michael O'Brien and John F. Garrett. O'Brien is regarded as one of the greatest birders of our time, and he is widely admired for his many articles and books on bird identification. Garrett is a teenage birder who has dazzled the high-caliber California birding community with his unreal field skills; he has also gained well-deserved national recognition in the past year or so.

There are some important differences between O'Brien and Garrett, and we're not just talking about their age difference. O'Brien lives in Cape May, New Jersey, where our quiz photos were taken. Garrett, however, has been outside his home state of California only once during the fall—to Cape May, admittedly. Needless to say, our two quizmasters bring somewhat different experiences to the challenge of identifying birds photographed at Cape May in the fall.

O'Brien and Garrett arrived at the exact same answers for all three of our quiz birds, but they got there by rather different methods. O'Brien employs

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the time-honored method of process-of-elimination. He quickly rules out all but a handful of ID contenders, and then he clinches the ID with "micro field marks," if you will—the exact pattern of the wing coverts on a Cape May Warbler, the pencil-thin dark streaks on the breast of a Palm Warbler, and so forth. Garrett, however, approaches bird identification from the perspective of ecological and behavioral context: Where

is the bird, and what is it doing? Such an approach gets him very quickly to, say, Palm Warbler and Pine Warbler.

Bird identification isn't an either/or proposition. Clearly, diverse methods work. They've worked here for O'Brien and Garrett, both of whom converge—quickly and efficiently so—on the same solutions.

— Ted Floyd and Cameron Cox

Quiz Photo A

The slim, pointed bill and slim legs quickly tell us that this is probably either a warbler or a pipit. Pipits don't normally perch in trees and—for related reasons—have longer, straighter hind claws than our quiz bird. They also have longer tertials that nearly reach the primary tips. Even in this edge-on view, it is clear that the primaries project well past the tertials. This is certainly not a pipit. Although Cape May gets its share of interesting vagrants, there are currently no records of any of the Old World *Phylloscopus* warblers. Could this be the first? No. Although appropriately drab, the weak supercilium and streaked flanks and undertail coverts rule out all *Phylloscopus* warblers. This must be one of our American wood-warblers.

With that in mind, the overall drab grayish coloration combined with moderate streaking below is actually very distinctive. Yellow-rumped and Palm look browner. Tennessee and Yellow lack streaking. Orange-crowned may have weak streaking, but it does not extend to the flanks or undertail coverts, and the undertail coverts would be yellow, not whitish, on an Orange-crowned. That leaves only **immature female Cape May Warbler**. A look at the wing pattern backs up this identification. Only Cape May shows the combination of pale-tipped median coverts and pale-edged greater coverts. And even the dullest Cape Mays usually show a yellowish tinged rump, just visible in this photo. —MO'B

First things first. Regrettably, I'm still not too familiar with northeastern trees, but I'd guess that this bird appears to be in some sort of birch. Although the neck is somewhat stretched out, the bird's structure looks overall fairly compact and trim. The bill is notably long and slightly curved, and the tail is held fairly aloft. So what is it? In some situations, traditional field marks are the



Quiz Photo A. Cape May, New Jersey; 10 October 2009. © Cameron Cox.

best way to identify birds—just use whatever methods you’re most comfortable with. The greenish rump and weak wing bars are good field marks for this **first-fall female Cape May Warbler**, and the greenish edges to the remiges and auriculars further clinch the identification. Only one field mark doesn’t fit: habitat.

In preparing for my first trip to Cape May, I’d read several times that Cape May Warblers are typically found at the tops of short-needled conifers, and indeed my very limited field experience with Cape Mays has all been of birds in the tops of short-needled conifers. It should be pretty obvious that this bird isn’t, however, in a conifer. No matter—Cape Mays do visit other trees from time to time, particularly in fall migration. Habitat is indeed a very good field mark, and understanding a bird’s preferred habitat will expand one’s understanding of the bird, but we need to keep in mind that habitat alone is rarely diagnostic. —JFG

Quiz Photo B

Our second quiz bird presents a similar problem to the first. A drab, slightly streaky, warbler-like bird. And for similar reasons—short hind claw, short tertials, streaky breast—we can quickly narrow our choices to wood-warblers. But which one? Although overall color and face pattern are probably enough, a quick look at the wing will really help narrow things down. This bird does not have obvious wing

bars, but it doesn’t have plain wings, either; instead, most of its feathers are showing moderately distinct pale edges. Yellow, Cape May, Prairie, and Palm are the only species that fit that description, and, with distinct streaking across the middle of the breast, only Cape May and Palm fit. Compared to the bird in Quiz Photo A, this bird has a much more distinct supercilium and also lacks distinct pale tips to the median coverts. Additionally, the face shows distinct dark lateral throat stripes, dark lores, and a short narrow pale central crown stripe—all just perfect for Palm Warbler, but not Cape May. And, for those intimately familiar with Palm Warbler, the pencil-thin dark streaks on the breast are actually unique to that species. The overall grayish-brown color, lacking a yellowish tinge to the supercilium or breast and

lacking a greenish tinge to the back, indicate the **nominate (*palmarum*) western subspecies of Palm Warbler**, a very common migrant through Cape May. I can just about hear the bird utter its distinctive chip note! —MO’B

This fairly bulky-looking warbler is not only on the ground, but, with its fairly long legs, it looks like it *belongs* on the ground. Only a handful of wood-warblers are typically associated with the ground, and indeed **Palm**



Quiz Photo B. Cape May, New Jersey; 10 October 2009. © Cameron Cox.



Quiz Photo C. Cape May, New Jersey; 25 September 2009. © Cameron Cox.

Warbler is the only one of these that is overall brownish with a greenish rump. Moreover, the tail looks fairly high, as if in mid-pump—and tail-pumping is a distinctive, well-known habit of Palm Warblers.

Any warbler will of course be on the ground occasionally. And any warbler can be caught in an awkward position that makes it look “bulky” and as if it’s holding its rear-end up. I can think of more than one human for whom that’s also the case. So if a few structural clues aren’t good enough—they rarely are in photographs—the contrasting brown auriculars, pale supercilium, thin-streaked breast, mostly plain-brown back, and greenish rump should be good enough. —JFG

Quiz Photo C

This is a trickier quiz than the previous two. It is clearly a small perching bird, given the appearance of the legs and feet, along with the apparent small size compared to the branch on which it’s perched. The bill is slim, pointed, and warbler-like, but a little heavier than that of most warblers. It’s much too heavy for a kinglet, but too tapered and pointed for a vireo. It looks like another wood-warbler.

The underparts are plain and very dull buffy-white. Interesting...

Very few warblers are that color below. They include female Black-throated Blue, immature female Pine, and Swainson’s warblers, possibly very dull Bay-breasted Warblers, and dull female Common Yellowthroats. That’s a pretty short list, and we haven’t even looked at face pattern yet. Swainson’s is quickly ruled out. The lack of a supercilium gives it away, plus the bill isn’t big enough. Black-throated Blue would have a finer, darker bill, plus its distinctive face pattern would include a thin pale supercilium and a much shorter arc of white below the eye.

Common Yellowthroat would almost always show more yellow on the throat than this, and would show a more extensive dark cheek patch encompassing the entire malar (the area behind the base of the lower mandible), which is mostly

pale on this bird. The flanks would also be more extensively brownish. Even the dullest immature Bay-breasted would have a more lime-green look to the head, as well as a weaker cheek patch and cleaner white belly. Also, there is just enough of the wing to see thick smudgy off-white wing bars, just perfect for **immature female Pine Warbler**, and not the crisp white wing bars of Bay-breasted. —MO’B

I’ve already said that I don’t know much about eastern trees, but I hope I’m right in saying this is a conifer, perhaps an eastern redcedar. The bird’s upright position is striking; both of the previous photo quizzes were of comparatively horizontal birds. I’ve noticed that birds that appear upright in photos tend to be either something that normally sits upright, like a flycatcher, or something that behaves sluggishly, like a vireo or Pine Warbler. No flycatchers or other upright birds or vireos found in Cape May look anything like this, however, so we’re left with **Pine Warbler**. Although this particular approach to identification might strike some as too implicit and inductive, Pine Warbler really seems to fit. It’s overall plain below, quite brown above, with strong white eye-arcs and a stout bill with a light patch at the base. —JFG