

Additional Thoughts on the March 2011 *Birding* Photo Quiz

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Let's be honest about something. The photo quizzes in *Birding* scare the crap out of most people. It's bad enough just to open up to the last page of each new issue of *Birding* and realize you simply don't know the birds in the new photo quiz. Imagine how much worse it must be for the person or persons assigned to write the quiz answers! Every single sentence—why, every single word—is sure to be dissected, mercilessly so, by the hyper-critical 10,000-some readers of *Birding* magazine. Did you write “juvenile” when you should have written “formative”? Are you sure the bird's an immature male, as opposed to a dull adult female? And what the heck's the “malar” anyhow?

It gets worse.

Indeed, it got a *lot* worse, starting about two years ago. That's when we started doing “blind” photo quizzes in *Birding*. Never mind “juvenile” vs. “formative” or “malar” vs. “mustachial.” Now the poor authors don't even know if we're talking Pomarine vs. Parasitic, Hammond's vs. Dusky, what have you.

Case in point. ABA President Jeff Gordon—no slouch at bird ID—tells me he was apprehensive about accepting the challenge of the May 2010 photo quiz. (He didn't say “apprehensive.” He used PG-13 language to convey his sense of apprehension.) His task: Identify all the birds in a grainy, shaky, two-minute video of parrots—lots of parrots, lots of *different* parrots—coming to a feeder on a breezy afternoon in Florida. Why, some of the species in the video aren't even depicted in North American field guides. “Oh, joy.” (Use your imagination to reconstruct Jeff's PG-13 utterance.)

Other authors have reacted in much the same way to the prospect of taking on one of the blind photo quizzes.

Not surprisingly, Photo Quiz Editor Cameron Cox and I have found it challenging to attract authors to the new photo quiz format. But we've persevered, and for most quizzes, we've succeeded in procuring the services—sometimes very grudgingly so—of two or more authors.

One very cool result of the switch to blind photo quizzes has been the preponderance of young birders who eventually assent—I mean, who eagerly say “Yes!”—to doing the quiz. Since the switch to the blind format, more than half the authors (11 out of 21) have been 25 years old or younger. If you want to hear more from me about the matter of young birders and *Birding* photo quizzes, check out my little essay, “Brat Pack,” posted to The ABA Blog this past October <tinyurl.com/62993b4>.

Yes, the ABA's fine young birders—and writers; and thinkers, too—have made my job a fair bit easier.

Things were made especially easy for me by one of our “contestants,” if you will, in the March 2011 photo quiz. Maia Paddock came out of nowhere and asked if she could do a photo quiz—any photo quiz. That's a first, I have to say. Cameron and I have never had somebody simply proclaim his or her availability for any and all quizzes.

I'm pretty sure Maia is also the youngest person ever to do a *Birding* photo quiz. She's a ninth-grade homeschooler. Even though she started birding at the commendably young age of ten, that means she's pretty new—by my standards, say, or Jeff Gordon's—to birding. She's been birding for—what?—a whopping three or four years.

Who to pair Maia with? Well, right around the time she directed her inquiry to *Birding* magazine, I had finally succeeded in persuading the mighty Jon Dunn, master of bird identification, to agree to do one of our blind quizzes. If you've ever birded with Jon—and I know many of you have, for he is incredibly generous with his time—you know that the experience is awesome. The guy knows so much. If you're out birding with Jon, every bird seen (or heard) is a point of entry into some learning experience about feather tracts, molts and plumages, geographic variation, and so forth.

Birding with Jon Dunn is like taking batting practice alongside Barry Bonds. And I'm saying that as something of a birding veteran. I've been birding for more than twice the number of years Maia Paddock has been alive. So there you have it: Maia Paddock, the fearless rookie; and Jon Dunn, the living legend.

Sorry for the long preamble, but I think the perspective is necessary. Maia and Jon have approached this quiz from two necessarily different vantage points, and I think it's interesting and worthwhile to compare their approaches. Without further ado, let's see how they handled the quiz.

Quiz Bird A

First, Maia describes the bird—plumage, bare parts, structure, and apparent overall size. That's excellent. As anyone who's ever been on a bird records committee will tell you, the best written descriptions are those that present a no-nonsense description of what was actually seen. Next, Maia reaches for the proverbial range map and notes—correctly—that only four hummingbird species are shown to occur regularly in Colorado. Three of these can be quickly discounted, so the bird has to be a Black-chinned Hummingbird. Maia also tells us

that the bird is a female.

Before turning to Jon's analysis, I want to point out that Maia's approach is exemplary. As I noted above, she starts off with a description of the bird. Then she factors in date and location. Finally, she notes the bird's plumage.

Like Maia, Jon provides a brief—very brief—description of the bird; then he eliminates various contenders; then he arrives at a quasi-identification of the bird as either Black-chinned or Ruby-throated.

Ruby-throated?

Yes, this bird is a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. *No fair!* The range maps in most field guides (Sibley, NGS, Peterson, etc.) show Ruby-throats nowhere near Colorado. If you check the two definitive references for Colorado, you'll find essentially nothing on Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. (Bob Andrews and Bob Righter, in their *Colorado Birds*, mention a single hypothetical occurrence; Alfred M. Bailey and Robert J. Niedrach, in their *Birds of Colorado*, mention no occurrences whatsoever.) I say it again: *No fair!*

Yet Jon states, "Ruby-throated is rare in Colorado." Where'd he get that? Well, maybe he consulted the range map in, ahem, the *Smithsonian Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, which shows that the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is, indeed, a rare migrant to eastern Colorado. Are Ruby-throats truly increasing in Colorado, or is it just that more folks are paying attention? Who knows. Regardless, they do seem to be rare migrants in eastern Colorado, especially in the fall.

If I were "grading" their answers, I'd give both contestants an A. Jon's instincts are spot-on, as usual, and his knowledge is current and impressive, as always. Did you notice that he didn't commit to a definite answer? And something else: He never told us the age or sex of the bird. Kudos to Maia for doing so. But the bird is actually an immature male, clearly shown as such in photos of the bird from other angles. Regardless, Maia's approach is rock solid. Were you able to place female-plumage hummingbirds to the correct genus when you were a ninth grader?

Quiz Bird B

Both Jon and Maia quickly get around to calling this bird a Plumbeous Vireo. Well, Jon takes a bit of a detour for Gray Vireo—rightly so, I would



Quiz Bird A. Colorado's Front Range region, late September. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

say. I've seen a lot of birders misidentify Plumbeous Vireos as Gray Vireos, especially in the summer. By mid-summer, Plumbeous Vireos can be exceedingly worn, approaching the appearance of Gray Vireo. But as Jon notes, the tail is a good mark of distinction. And not only tail structure, as Jon points out; I would add that Gray Vireos tend to flip their tails about, expressively so. If you have a fair bit of experience with Gray Vireos, you come to appreciate something about their "body language," as Kevin Karlson puts it; you come to realize that they're a bit more active, a bit more fidgety, a bit more expressive.

Obnoxious paragraph alert! I *hate* it when veteran birders say or write something like "I've seen a lot of birders misidentify..."—as I just did. It's condescending, which is bad enough, but it's also a case of "projecting." It's code for "I used to do that a lot." So let me offer here, in plain view, a public confession. Some twenty years ago, I saw my first "Gray Vireo" in unsuitable habitat at the end of the second week of August. I now wonder if it was a worn Plumbeous Vireo. I think we veterans would do a far more effective job of outreach to beginning and intermediate birders if we weren't always so preachy—if we weren't always portraying mistakes as something *other* birders commit. I think we who have been at it for many years have a tendency to think of ourselves as dispensers of wisdom to the unwashed masses. Let's not do that. Let's reprogram ourselves to believe that all of us—beginners and "experts" alike—have much to learn from one another.

But I've digressed, as Jon Dunn loves to say.

Back to the quiz bird, which is *not* a Gray Vireo. Now I have to say, this bird didn't leap out to me as a Plumbeous Vireo—as it seems to have for Maia and Jon. On this bird, Maia notes

"perhaps a very small hint of a yellowish tinge in the belly," and that tripped me up. I wonder sometimes just how washed-out and grayish a dull Cassin's Vireo might appear by mid-spring, when the quiz photo was taken. For sure, I've seen presumed Cassin's Vireos—birds on the breeding grounds in early summer—that look awfully washed out and grayish.

In retrospect, I'm sure Maia and Jon are correct. This is "just" a Plumbeous Vireo. But let me be honest: If I were doing this quiz blind, without the benefit of having seen Maia's and Jon's independently



Quiz Bird B. Colorado's Front Range region, mid-May. Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

derived analyses, I would have waffled. I would have said, “probably a Plumbeous.”

Quiz Bird C

Jon starts off his analysis on a nomenclatorial note. The bird formerly known as the Winter Wren was recently split, Jon reminds us, into two species: Winter Wren and Pacific Wren. “There has been a lot of whining about the English of the latter,” Jon writes, “for after all, the species is not found in the Pacific Ocean.”

Honestly, the only whining I’ve heard has come from Steve Howell, who isn’t a native speaker of American English. The word “Pacific” is fine in this context. Think of the Pacific Time Zone, which contains the entire state of Nevada. Think of the Pac 10 Athletic Conference, which includes universities in Arizona, Utah, and elsewhere. Et cetera. “Pacific,” in twenty-first century parlance, means “pretty far west in North America.”

The problem, then, isn’t with the new name “Pacific Wren.” No, the problem is with the crazy “new”—except it isn’t—name “Winter Wren.” Assuming $B \neq 0$, you cannot split A into A and B . We all learned that in Algebra 1. And we relearned it when we studied electromagnetism: You cannot split a particle with charge A into two particles with nonzero charges A and B .

In theory, the folks at the American Ornithologists’ Union (A.O.U.) are acquainted with this fundamental reality about the way things are in our universe. On p. xiii of the 7th edition of *The A.O.U. Checklist of North American Birds*, it is stated—admittedly, with some amount of equivocation—that, when it comes to splitting species, “no English name should be used for both a combined species and one of the components.” In other words, A should be split into B and C , or into A' and A'' , or anything else you can think of—except A itself.

I think we should call the two new species Pacific Wren and Boreal Wren.

But for now they’re called Pacific Wren and Winter Wren—which has created a huge headache for birders. I can’t begin to tell you the number of times I’ve heard birders get tripped up on splits of the $A=A+B$ sort. All the time, I hear stuff like, “Pacific Wren was split from Winter Wren.” Also: “Cackling Goose was split from Canada Goose.” Quite understandably, folks are under the impression that Pacific Wren and Cackling Goose are evolutionary propagules of Winter Wren and Canada Goose, respectively. Wrong! Pacific Wren is no more a split from Winter Wren than Dusky Grouse is a split from Sooty Grouse. Whenever the A.O.U. splits A into A and B , it—



Quiz Bird C. Colorado’s Front Range region, Mid-December.
Photo by © Bill Schmoker.

unwittingly of course—promotes ignorance about speciation. And the last thing we need right now is further ignorance about evolution.

Let’s never do this again. If the Common Moorhen gets split later this year, please—*please*—call the two new species anything, anything at all, except Common Moorhen and something else. There will be untold nomenclatorial pain and suffering if the old name is retained for one of the new species. You’ll have folks saying that one new species was split from—that it has budded off from—the other, which is nonsense. On top of that, you’ll have lots of folks who *simply aren’t aware* of the split. When you retain an old name, it is entirely to be expected that many folks won’t be aware

that anything’s changed.

Which brings me, at long last, to Maia’s analysis. She says Quiz Bird C is a Winter Wren. Based on what she can see of the bird’s plumage, structure, behavior, and microhabitat, she quickly eliminates the contenders. It’s not any of the other wrens, so it must be a Winter Wren. Gee, that was easy.

Too easy.

Which brings us now to Jon’s analysis. He, too, quickly arrives at Winter Wren. But not the same Winter Wren that Maia is talking about. Jon’s talking about the Winter Wren that consists of two or more species, one of which is the Winter Wren that Maia has in mind. Got it? Maia’s telling us about the Winter Wren, whereas Jon’s telling us about the other Winter Wren. This is worse than an *Abbott and Costello* routine.

I’m guessing Maia hadn’t heard the news that the Winter Wren was recently split from the Winter Wren. But imagine, if you will, that the new species had been named the Boreal Wren. In that case, I think Maia would have known. What’s in a name? Plenty. The standard English names of birds ought to help folks understand the birds they encounter in the field. In this regard, it would help immensely if the A.O.U. would go back to the drawing board and split the erstwhile Winter Wren into the Pacific and Boreal wrens.

One final thought. Jon doesn’t exactly commit to saying that Quiz Bird C is a Winter Wren *sensu stricto*. (*Sensu stricto*. Barf. Well, I wouldn’t have to write that if the A.O.U. would change the bird’s name.) Rather, he calls it a “tentative guess.” Good for him. There was some amount of controversy about this particular bird, which sounded to several observers—myself included, for what that’s worth—more like a Pacific Wren than a Winter Wren *sensu stricto*. But it didn’t sound like a textbook-perfect Pacific Wren. I came to be persuaded that this bird was a Winter Wren *sensu stricto* with an odd call.

Or maybe it was a hybrid... ☺