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August 2005 Quiz

Glenn Coady

Our quiz bird this time around is a slender passerine with a short, stout, and rather blunt-tipped bill. It is a choice most befitting the final season of our Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, as no doubt many atlasers have come across this identification conundrum themselves quite early on in the atlas.

Our bird's bill structure and its general proportions allow us to quickly eliminate most of the bird families on the checklist from consideration. It lacks the stiff, pointed tail and sharp, chisel-like bill of our woodpeckers. Its long-legged, upright posture, in combination with its stippled crown (not to mention ground-based foraging), is inconsistent with any of our tyrant flycatchers. It lacks the hook-tipped bill of our shrikes or vireos. It is too petite and slender to be any of the corvids. It lacks the very tiny bill and very long wings of the aerial-foraging swifts and swallows. It is too slender and has too long a bill for our chickadees or titmouse, and it lacks the short tail and upturned bill of the nuthatches. It lacks the decurved bill and pointed, stiff tail of the Brown Creeper. It doesn't demonstrate the very short and rounded wings of any of the wrens. It has too stout a bill and is not compact enough to be one of the kinglets. It is clearly not proportionately long-tailed enough for the

gnatcatchers, catbirds, mockingbirds or thrashers. It lacks the strongly pointed, thorn-like bill of the European Starling. It also lacks the pointed crest of the waxwings. The wood-warblers and icterids all have more sharply pointed bills than this bird. Conversely, the tanagers, emberizids, cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, finches and Old World sparrows all have conical bills, unlike this bird.

In short order we have, therefore, ruled out all but the pipits, larks and thrushes as reasonable possibilities. A close look at our bird reveals that it has a finely and intricately stippled crown and back, as well as bright, crisp and even edges to the greater and median coverts, all indicators of a bird in fresh plumage. Combined with the fact that this bird is not a good match for either sex of our larks, pipits or thrushes in adult plumage, most observers would intuitively recognize that we are thus dealing with a fresh juvenile bird (hopefully before they have gone racing for their foreign field guides!).

All of our juvenile thrushes are distinctly spotted or scalloped on the breast, unlike our quiz bird, and so they can be eliminated easily as well. Likewise, both juvenile American Pipit and juvenile Sprague's Pipit have streaked breasts, unlike the plain breast with

simply a darker wash across the upper chest, as seen in this quiz bird. Juvenile Sprague's Pipit also has a plain, pale, buffy head colour that contrasts starkly with the dark iris to present a definite "blank stare" appearance. This is quite unlike the quiz bird, for which the iris appears much better concealed in a partial dark "mask". Juvenile American Pipit tends to have a longer and more pointed bill, as well as a more uniformly patterned head and crown than this bird. Although juvenile longspurs are quite often mistaken for this bird, as previously noted they are easily eliminated by their much more conical bill.

By process of elimination, it is

evident that our quiz bird is a juvenile **Horned Lark**. Note that even this early in its development, we see evidence of the dark mask and breast band that it consistently shows in all plumages. In the field we might also have picked up on the shuffling walking gait so characteristic of Horned Larks as well, but beware that within the first month of fledging many juvenile Horned Larks are actually more prone to hopping than their typical walking. It has been suggested that the developmental acquisition of walking might be explained on the basis that hopping is the more ancient phylogenetic form of locomotion. I photographed this juvenile Horned Lark in Churchill, Manitoba on 2 July 1991.

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