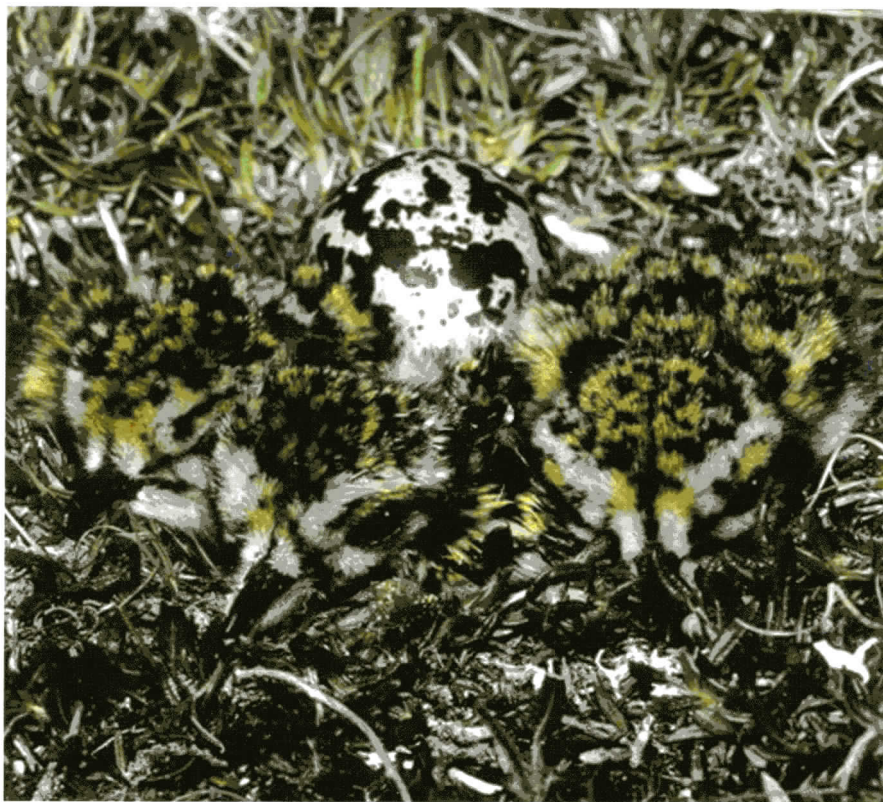


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August 2006 Quiz

Glenn Coady

For this photo quiz, we have presented a much different type of challenge than usual. As a tribute to this summer's fiftieth field season for the Ontario Nest Record Scheme, we submit this nest photograph with an egg and recently-hatched nestlings for your consideration.

Although not likely to be carried in the field by many birders, there is a very good field guide for identifying North American nests, eggs, and nestlings. Many Ontario observers are likely still unfamiliar with *A Guide to the Nests, Eggs, and Nestlings of North American Birds (Second Edition)* by Paul J. Baicich and Colin J. O. Harrison (Academic Press, 1997). It contains a wealth of information on the topic of nests, with thorough descriptions, illustrations and identification keys for the nests, eggs, and nestlings of most North American breeding birds. Most well-described Ontario nests with eggs and/or young can likely be keyed out using this book without having to visit a major ornithological collection for suitable reference material.

Of course, in the field, in most situations where one can obtain good descriptions of nests, eggs and/or nestlings, that information becomes academic. Such opportunities will more often than not involve the presence of well-known, easily

identified adults providing agitated nest defence or distraction display, making identification of the nest and its contents decidedly routine. For the purposes of the quiz though, we will use the information in Baicich and Harrison to narrow our list of candidates.

The first thing we notice is that there is little or no constructed nest in this case and it is found on open ground not adjacent to any water. Baicich and Harrison's key to the nests suggests the only Ontario breeding birds likely associated with such a nest would be Peregrine Falcon, Willow Ptarmigan, Wild Turkey, most plovers, some sandpipers, Parasitic Jaeger, and the goat-suckers. Given the recent description of a ground-nesting Merlin in Ontario, we might also consider it a possibility based on the type of nest. Although gulls and terns tend to nest colonially and near water, a tight nest photo like this one might depict one of their nests, as well.

The one creamy-white egg in the nest is medium-sized based on comparison to the vegetation around the nest, and is mottled with very large black blotches. Peregrine Falcon and Merlin both have reddish eggs and can easily be ruled out. Wild Turkey eggs are much more finely spotted with brown or purple flecking. Parasitic Jaegers tend to have eggs

with a much more olive to olive-brown ground colour. The combination of this type of nest with a medium-sized white egg with heavy black blotches is thus only likely to belong to either a Willow Ptarmigan, larger plover, large sandpiper, gull, tern or goatsucker. We could reduce this list further if we were able to adequately describe the egg shape, but in this photo the egg shape is not easy to clearly ascertain.

The nestlings would best be described according to the Baicich and Harrison key as large, downy nestlings that are striped or mottled, with a long and slender bill. The long and slender bill would easily rule out Willow Ptarmigan (which generally also have more reddish eggs than this with finer blotches, although they can vary to creamy white) and any of the goatsuckers.

So we are dealing here with either a large plover, one of the larger sandpipers, a tern or gull (except Bonaparte's Gull, which is a tree nester). Note that the nestlings in the photo have fairly long and slender bills that are uniformly black from the base to the tip. At this age, all of the nestlings of the larger breeding gull species in Ontario (Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, and Great Black-backed Gull) have shorter, black bills with contrasting white tips. Little Gull nestlings have a pinkish-based bill with a dusky tip. The nestlings of all the breeding species of tern in Ontario (Caspian, Common, Arctic,

Forster's, and Black) show pinkish or reddish-based bills with contrasting dark tips at this age.

The most striking thing about these nestlings is how extensively yellow-gold they are and how heavily mottled with black. Among the Ontario breeding species of shorebirds, only the plovers routinely construct little or no nest beyond a simple, mostly unlined scrape. Among the Ontario breeding plovers (American Golden-Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Piping Plover, and Killdeer) only the American Golden-Plover has so yellow-gold a nestling that is so heavily mottled with black. This **American Golden-Plover** nest was photographed in Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island, Nunavut, on 11 July 1996 by Jim Richards.

This is quite a fitting species to choose as a tribute to the Ontario Nest Record Scheme. Although breeding evidence for American Golden-Plover in the Cape Henrietta Maria area was obtained as early as 1948, the first nest was found on 23 June 1970 near radar site 415 by none other than Ontario Nest Record Scheme coordinator George Peck.

I am sure all OFO members wish to join me in thanking George for his life-long commitment to the success of the Ontario Nest Record Scheme, one of the finest nest databases to be found anywhere in the world. May the next fifty years be equally as successful.