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December 2004 Quiz

Glenn Coady

For this photo quiz, we present a bird captured in mid-flight, a view not often easily obtained under normal field conditions. It is probably fair to say that most birders would quickly recognize this relatively long and narrow-billed, long-legged bird, found in open shoreline habitat, as belonging to one of Ontario's 50 species of shorebirds.

A quick look at the general size and shape of this bird reveals it to be a fairly large shorebird with a long and stout bill (longer than the head itself) and quite remarkably long legs (which would seem likely to trail considerably beyond the length of the tail in flight). These characteristics alone eliminate quite a number of shorebird possibilities, including: all of the plovers of the genera *Charadrius* and *Pluvialis*; virtually all of the shorebirds in the genus *Calidris* (with the lone exception of Stilt Sandpiper); all the phalaropes; all the curlews (whose legs fail to trail beyond their long tails in flight); and other relatively short-legged species such as American Oystercatcher, Upland Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Wandering Tattler, Ruddy Turnstone, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, American Woodcock and Wilson's Snipe. Most of these species can also be eliminated easily using many other criteria.

Two of the most striking features of this bird are its exceptionally and solidly dark tail, and this dark tail's pronounced contrast with its bright white upper tail coverts. These features eliminate a further complement of shorebird possibilities, including: American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Willet, Stilt Sandpiper; all four of the possible species of the genus *Tringa*; both dowitcher species; as well as both Bar-tailed Godwit and Marbled Godwit. All of these species have either pale or distinctly barred tail feathers, quite unlike the solid black pattern exhibited by this quiz bird. Additionally, our quiz bird's tail and upper tail coverts lack the fairly unique U-shaped white pattern shown by the Ruff, which we can thus also eliminate from further consideration.

Scrolling through the list of Ontario shorebirds, we can see we have thus eliminated all of the species other than Hudsonian Godwit and Black-tailed Godwit. Certainly, our long-winged, long-legged, long-billed bird, with a narrow white wing stripe visible at the base of the flight feathers, is consistent with a godwit.

Separation of these two species is relatively straightforward, particularly given the look we are pre-

sented with here. Hudsonian Godwits in all plumages show black underwing linings and axillaries, as well as dark flight feathers. Conversely, Black-tailed Godwits in all plumages show a very clean, white underwing lining and axillaries, and very light flight feathers (except for a narrow dark leading and trailing edge to the underwing). Clearly then, our quiz bird is a **Black-tailed Godwit**.

Black-tailed Godwits also have a proportionately longer and straighter bill when compared to Hudsonian Godwits. However, our quiz bird's bill is viewed at an oblique angle, making this feature difficult to assess. The photo does illustrate nicely the broader, more rounded wing profile of a Black-tailed Godwit in comparison to the more pointed-looking wings of both Hudsonian Godwit and Bar-tailed Godwit (which has yet to occur in Ontario). The bright ochre-buff colour of the bird's head and neck, combined with its lack of any belly or flank barring, make it possible to age this as a juvenile Black-tailed Godwit. The rich ochre-buff colour is more characteristic of a juvenile Black-tailed Godwit, with juvenile



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David Renaud

Hudsonian Godwits generally showing a less extensive and more muted grayish-buff head and neck.

I photographed this juvenile Black-tailed Godwit at Kingston, Ontario on 19 December 1995. Black-tailed Godwit is accidental in Ontario, with only two occurrences to date. Both involved juvenile birds that occurred in the fall of 1995—possibly the same bird involved in both instances.

Glenn Coady, 604 – 60 Mountview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6P 2L4