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Photo Quiz

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The hooked bill and large talons immediately categorize this as a bird of prey. Moreover, the slim proportions and long body together with small head, and face not flattened at all, reveal a diurnal predator or hawk.

It is an immature hawk as revealed by the brown plumage and, to the extent that it is visible, the streaked rather than barred underparts. More precisely, it is a juvenile. Most passerines retain a juvenal plumage for a short period of time before molting into a first basic plumage. Away from the breeding grounds, we seldom see passerines in juvenal plumages. However, young of most species of hawks (of course, there are exceptions!) retain their first feathers until they are about a year old. Then they molt into a basic plumage, which can be distinguished from adult plumage only in some species.

As readers know, hawk identification, and indeed bird identification in general, is an exercise in classification. Our brains do most of this almost instantly when our eyes capture an image. The job of this column is to break these processes down into discrete parts.

We group hawks according to morphological similarities into families, subfamilies and genera. We are all familiar with the quintessential buteo, the Red-tailed Hawk. Many of the buteos in immature plumages are brown and streaked like our bird. They have chunky bodies and short to medium-length tails. The effect of the shorter tails and long wings in most species is that the

wingtips extend well down the tail, almost to the tip of the tail on some species and even beyond in a couple. Nonetheless, two of our buteos approach the subject bird in general appearance. Perched juvenal Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks are brown above and streaked below and do not always appear chunky. Their wingtips do, however, extend three-quarters of the way down the tail, and they have dark irides. These features cannot be ascribed to our very slim bird whose wingtips barely extend a third of the way down the tail. It is not a buteo.

Female Northern Harriers are slim brown hawks. Once again, they have longer wings, with the primaries extending more than half way to the tail tip. Also not evident on our bird is the harrier facial disc outlined in lighter feathers, similar to that of owls, and which is used to gather sounds during crepuscular hunting. Also note that on brown (i.e., non-adult male) Northern Harriers, the eye is marked above and below with white lines of feathers. The total effect is to give this species a highly distinctive visage. It is not a Northern Harrier.

One kite and several of the falcons are brown-backed. Immature Mississippi Kites are brown dorsally but have large dark eyes and black surrounding the eye. They also have very long wings, suitable for aerial foraging and which extend beyond the tail. The falcons, such as Merlin and Peregrine, which in some plumages are brown-backed, have a classic bull-chested appearance, large dark eyes and

long wings that extend to or almost to the tail tip.

So this bird standing out in the open on a fence post is one of those forest hunters of the genus *Accipiter*. These are short-winged, long-tailed birds. All three of our accipiters are brown in juvenal plumage, and have yellow eyes. Especially given the fleeting looks we often get, any one species can be mistaken for either of the other two. Fortunately, this excellent photo permits leisurely discussion about many of the features used to distinguish the three. We cannot see the underparts adequately but we can take these features one at a time to explain why this is a juvenile **Cooper's Hawk**.

Shape and proportions: The bird is rather long and lanky, with an extremely long tail, a feature of Cooper's. Sharp-shinned Hawk is more compact, with a proportionately shorter tail. Northern Goshawk is a more robust bird, with a broader tail.

White supercilium: This feature is quite variable. It is nearly always prominent in Northern Goshawk and found to varying degrees in the other two. This bird has a bolder eyeline than I usually see on Cooper's Hawk.

Back: The white mottling on scapulars and tertials is least on Sharp-shinned Hawk and more obvious on the larger two.

Legs: The legs (tarsi) are positively "spindly" in Sharp-shinned Hawk. This bird has quite strong looking legs, as in the larger two.

Tail: The tail in this excellent photo can be used to eliminate Northern Goshawk. In that species, each dark band on the tail is margined in white. Moreover, the tail bands are wavy rather than even as on this bird. Cooper's Hawk frequently has a broad white tip to the tail. However, in its second calendar year, wear reduces this feature. The extensive white blotching dorsally also suggests the effect of time and weather. The outer rectrix on Cooper's Hawk is slightly shorter than the other tail feathers, creating rounded edges to the tail which can be seen in this bird and which points more to this species. But beware that some Sharp-shins can have rounded tails.

Head: All three accipiters can appear to have rounded heads. However, when perched, Cooper's can raise the feathers at the rear of the crown (hackles) or they can be raised by the wind, as other feathers appear to be in this case. A distinctive Cooper's Hawk head profile is thus created.

In the case of Cooper's Hawk, then, some of the noted features, in particular the tail pattern, eliminate the larger Northern Goshawk and others, in combination, eliminate the smaller Sharp-shinned hawk. Barry Cheriére photographed this juvenile Cooper's Hawk during April in Texas.