

# Photo Quiz

by  
Bob Curry

So this is what I get for complaining about the "too easy" Broad-winged Hawk! Some readers will recall the AGM quiz several years ago when a colour slide of a *Catharus* thrush fully two feet high on the screen split the audience down the middle, with one half certain that the bird was a Veery and the other equally adamant that it was a Hermit. This was another reminder that identification of a non-moving photo image of a bird is infinitely more difficult than of a bird in life. Notwithstanding such difficulties, we shall endeavour to explain that the Photo Quiz bird in *Ontario Birds* 12 (1) is a **Hermit** - - or a **Swainson's Thrush!**

Let's say at the outset that it may be impossible to unequivocally identify the species from this black-and-white photograph. With a black-and-white still we'll have to forego the colour differences, behavioural idiosyncracies and species-specific vocalizations, all of which taken in combination render thrush identification perhaps not simple but, with knowledge and experience, quite manageable. Even with colour transparencies (which your correspondent unabashedly admits to having studied) there are problems with light quality at the time, and with colour saturation of the film. Incidentally, the bird is an immature as evidenced by the light tips to a couple of greater coverts, but this is of no help in species identification.

First, let's eliminate the easier species. The spotted breast, plump body and relatively short, straight bill indicate immediately that this is one of the brown thrushes. Wood Thrush

with more extensive large, bold, discrete spots or blotches sharply contrasting with clear, white underparts, a relatively large somewhat crested head and stout bill, and very bold eye ring, may be quickly eliminated. Wood Thrush is structurally different enough to be placed in a genus separate from the four *Catharus* thrushes to which we now turn our attention. Veery, at least the subspecies found in Ontario, has smaller, less distinct breast spots blending into a warm wash, and a vague or slight eye ring. Often there are no discrete breast spots on Veery, with just a wash across the breast. Our bird is not a Veery.

Distinguishing the other three *Catharus* thrushes in this head-on photo requires analyzing the facial patterns. Most frequently Swainson's has a much bolder, thicker eye ring and a spectacled effect as the lores are the same light buff shade. The photo bird shows some whitish in the lores but it is not an extension of the eye ring but rather separate from it and not well defined. In my experience, in perhaps five to ten percent of Swainson's the eye ring is much less bold and the spectacled effect is also lost so that the face can look very much like Hermit. This may be just such an instance. In such cases, features alluded to earlier such as breast and upperparts colours, voice and mannerisms will be necessary to clinch identification.

The most frequent misidentification within this group is the Gray-cheeked/Hermit problem, especially when a bird appears as in the photo then abruptly departs

through thick vegetation and deep shadow, allowing no clear dorsal view. For the sake of this analysis, Bicknell's Thrush (*C. minimus bicknelli*) will be included with Gray-cheeked, not least because none of the described differences in appearance (Ouellet 1993) of that subspecies or species is discernable in a black-and-white photograph. Gray-cheeked generally presents a plain-faced visage with little or no apparent eye ring. However, many birds possess a one-half to two-thirds complete whitish eye ring except that the front of the eye is plain lending the bird a vapid look. Hermit always has a complete, uniform, relatively fine but nonetheless conspicuous, whitish eye ring as is apparent in the photo. This lends it an alert appearance rather consistent with its

behaviour when encountered. Hermit also has the most symmetrically rounded head, and appears the "plumpest" of the *Catharus*, a feature also evident in this photo.

Using the print, therefore, Gray-cheeked can be eliminated, and my sense is that this is a Hermit Thrush. However, the colour slides show a slightly buffy tone to the upper breast, throat and eye ring, suggestive of Swainson's. However, the entire slide is a warm "golden", late September - early October image which may exaggerate these tones. With apologies that readers do not have all the information, we nevertheless invite your comments on this bird.

#### Literature cited

Ouellet, H. 1993. Bicknell's Thrush in Ontario. Ontario Birds 11: 41-45.

Bob Curry, 92 Hostein Drive, Ancaster, Ontario L9G 2S7.

#### Editors' Note:

Here's our next quiz bird, and it is definitely not a thrush!

