

Because of its stubby, conical bill, our August bird is readily recognizable as a "finch." Of course, assignment to that loose category still leaves a lot of field guide pages to look at for a match. At least we know we must look near the back of the book. The modest size of the bill rules out the cardinals and grosbeaks, and the apparent lack of distinct streaking in the upperparts seems to rule out typical sparrows and longspurs.

Now, what else stands out about our bird? - pale, apparently unstreaked underparts; dark upperparts with narrow, paler feather edges barely visible on the back; two pale wing bars; and, most notably, a clear pale shoulder patch (probably not white) much like the epaulette of a Red-winged Blackbird. Can we find a match to these characters in our standard North American field guide? The extensive contrasting markings of the wings and the chunky proportions steer us to such birds as goldfinches and buntings - a considerably smaller number of candidates in our field guide.

Among the finch-like birds of regular occurrence, the closest candidates seem to be the Dickcissel and the winter-plumaged American Goldfinch, both of which possess a shoulder patch. But neither of these fits, even superficially. The Dickcissel lacks the wing bars, and its shoulder patch is rich chestnut, not pale. The American Goldfinch does not have so much contrast between upper- and underparts. Neither of these birds has the very noticeable small white (?) patch beneath the lower wing bar.

At this point we must consider the possibility that our bird is a vagrant from somewhere else in the world. For a finch-like bird in February, the most likely origin is Eurasia. Checking the finch plates of any European field guide, we quickly find two candidates: the Chaffinch (Fringilla coelebs) and the Brambling (F. montifringilla). Each of these has a large pale shoulder patch and a smaller white mark visible at the bases of the primaries on the folded wing. A good mark

Photo by Roger Everett



of distinction between these species in the field is the rump - greenish in the Chaffinch and white in the Brambling, but the rump is not visible in the photograph. On closer examination, the Chaffinch fits less well. Its shoulder patch is really just an enlarged wing bar - i.e., it is bordered above by a darker row of wing coverts, and the patch is pure white, not just pale as it seems in the photograph. The winter male Brambling fits well, however. Its shoulder patch is pale rusty, contrasting with the white upper wing bar. Its underparts are clear and generally whitish except for the pale rusty upper breast. The head and back are blackish with narrow paler feather edges. (The brilliant black head and back of the summer male Brambling emerge with the wearing away of these feather edges.) The more extensive feather edging of the head creates some contrasting pale areas, particularly near the eye, something very evident in our photograph.

Our bird is indeed a Brambling, a species immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with it. For most readers, then, the challenge of this "At A Glance" was not to recognize the familiar in the obscure, but the challenge of the unfamiliar itself, clearly presented.

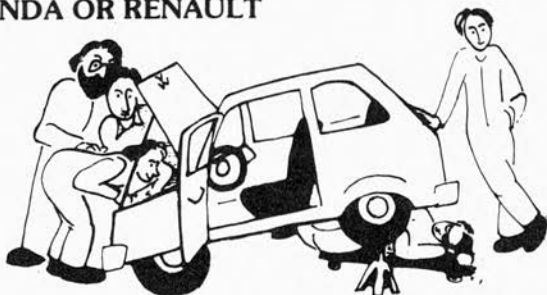
The Brambling is a common breeding bird of the birch and coniferous forests throughout northern Eurasia, from Scandinavia in the west to Siberia in the east. It migrates irruptively, sometimes in huge flocks, and can be found in winter throughout most of southern and central Europe and temperate Asia. Its status as an uncommon migrant in the western Aleutian Islands and as a casual visitor to the Alaskan mainland accounts for its inclusion in the more recent North American field guides. It is a casual winter visitor in Iceland, the most likely origin for a bird of this species that appears as an accidental in Massachusetts. But, as the 6th A.O.U. Checklist suggests: "Some records, especially those from the northeastern states, may be of escaped cage birds" (p. 742).

Chris Floyd, Lexington

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# At a Glance . . .

Photo by Roger Everett.



Can you identify this bird? Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*. Bird Observer will again award a PRIZE to the reader who submits the most correct answers in 1984. Please send your entry on a postcard to Bird Observer, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178 before the answer is published in the next issue.



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