

Before getting to the specifics of October's mystery bird, I think it would be useful to review the circumstances under which we play this game. When we compare the activities of field identification and photo recognition, it becomes apparent that there are several distinct differences. Armchair birding often leaves us without the two important perspectives of time and place. In a real sense we can say we don't know what to expect. Another obvious problem is the one of feather coloration. Photo identification forces us to rely on silhouette, shape, and apparent size as well as the shading and pattern of feathers. If all goes well, recognition of the more general characteristics brings us to the correct family and the details lead to specific identification.

And what of October's bird? As our subject is neatly perched on a stick and shows three toes facing forward and one backward, we can reasonably be assured we are dealing with a passerine. The conical bill shape leads us to the fringillid or finch family. Unfortunately for us (and, no doubt, to the glee of the editor) we have landed in the largest family (86 species) in North America. Included in this group are the buntings, grosbeaks, finches, sparrows, and longspurs. As Chris Floyd pointed out in the previous photo quiz, this "still leaves a lot of field guide pages . . ."

In the best of all possible worlds, the next step would be to identify the group to which this bird must belong. That we can accomplish this, i.e., eliminate all but one of these subgroupings simply on the basis of external characteristics obvious from the photograph, is problematic. Although we can safely eliminate grosbeaks (and cardinal) and many of the "finches" on the basis of their relatively larger and heavier bills, and perhaps the bunting (Passerina) group because of the wintry scene, our technique at this point becomes somewhat less "pure." Judged by the general size and shape of our bird, some of the finches, the sparrows, and the longspurs are still possible. At this stage we need to rely on our own field experience or trial and error, or some combination of these, move forward.

After flirting with various finches and a longspur or two, you will probably have to entertain the possibility that this beast may be a sparrow. To those of you who at this point (or several paragraphs earlier) have thrown up your hands and said, "Of course, the bird is a sparrow," I urge you to remember the time when such things weren't so obvious. The experienced observer relies on years of fumbling around field guides, mistakes, questions, and successes to develop a repertoire that leads to correct identification. We know what it is, not because its general bill shape, relatively short tail, and streaking disqualify it from being a longspur, but

rather from a combination of positive characters we attribute to this species.

Apart from its "finchness," this bird shows a prominent, white chin patch (with whisker), streaking on the breast (with a hint of a darker central chest spot), a broad sweep of gray over the eye which joins a similar swath along the side of the neck, and a relatively short tail. The crown (with a barely discernible median stripe) and wings seem very dark. The problem from here is to eliminate the less useful characters, or conversely, to focus on the useful ones.

Assuming that we are searching in the sparrow sections of various field guides, we might eliminate the tail as something we can key on. Most sparrows have relatively short tails, and the angle of the bird in the photograph presents problems. We have noticed by now that several field guides divide sparrows on the basis of whether or not the breast is streaked. Further study, however, informs us that most (Henslow's Sparrow is an exception) immature sparrows have streaked breasts and that some species show a rather diffuse streaking in winter. The presence or absence of a central chest spot is a variable character in many species. We might next concentrate on the chin spot. This does eliminate quite a few species - but by no means all but one. White-throated, Lincoln's, Swamp, and Song sparrows, along with a few others, are still in the running. What about combining the throat patch with the broad gray areas over the eye and around the side of the neck? Now we seem to be getting somewhere. Two species remain as possible candidates: Lincoln's Sparrow and Swamp Sparrow. Characteristics shared by these congeners (*Melospiza*) include breast-streaking (fine streaks in Lincoln's and diffuse in Swamp), possible central chest spot, whitish chin, grayish areas above eye and on sides of neck, a gray median stripe, and a narrow white eye-ring.

The dark crown and wings of our bird contrast strongly with the lighter areas. Also, the breast streaking seems blurred rather than defined. The white chin area is clear rather than spotted or streaked. These final considerations lead us to the conclusion that our bird is a Swamp Sparrow. Negative evidence which argues against this being a Lincoln's Sparrow include the winter scene and the lack of a raised crest (a commonly observed display in this furtive species).

Although the setting of this photograph might not be the optimal one for this species, Swamp Sparrows are regular over-winterers in Massachusetts in small numbers in some wetland areas. Lincoln's Sparrow is rare in winter.

Richard Walton, Concord

RICHARD WALTON, whose forthcoming book, Birds of the Sudbury River Valley, may be in print before this issue, is a teacher and naturalist in Concord and has been interested in birds for fifteen years.