

April's mystery bird does not leave the viewer much to work with in the way of concrete field characters. At once we are struck by a bill that can only belong to a finch, sparrow, or blackbird. The bird's size is difficult to ascertain without a known object in the picture for comparison. However, the legs and feet suggest a sturdy bird when viewed against the pine twig that it is perched on. The appearance of pale tips on the greater wing coverts is suggestive, although not a definitive indication, that the bird is in juvenile or immature plumage. The underparts are disconcertingly hidden from view. Fortunately, however, we have a clear look at the back, which plainly exhibits a unique scaled appearance - a feature confined to only one species in our area when combined with the other visible features of the bird in the picture.

Considering the above, species which should be considered when trying to identify the mystery bird might include the females of the House Finch and the Indigo Bunting, along with the juvenile Brown-headed Cowbird. The bill of a House Finch would likely show a more curved culmen, giving the bill a stubby and thick-based appearance. Likewise, a female House Finch would show dorsal streaking, not scaling. The female Indigo Bunting shows an unstreaked back - a back that under most circumstances looks remarkably even in tone. Thus, we are left with juvenile Brown-headed Cowbird as the AT A GLANCE species. The bird's combination of uniform, drab appearance, finch-like bill, faint wing bars, and an obviously scaly back all typify Molothrus ater. If we could see the underparts, we would find faint gray breast streaks on an otherwise light gray breast. While familiar enough when observed begging food from a smaller songbird, the lowly cowbird can also be seen to present a field problem when seen out of context. The individual pictured was photographed at Monomoy in early September.

W.R.P.



*Brown-headed Cowbird* Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

# At a Glance . . .

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird? Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*. Bird Observer will award a PRIZE to the reader who submits the most correct answers in 1985. Please send your entry on a postcard to Bird Observer, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178 before the answer is published.



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