

FIELD TIPS: THE SINGLE FIELD MARK SYNDROME¹

by Kimball Garrett, UCLA

Over and over again Jon Dunn and I have pointed out in our bird identification articles the pitfalls of basing identifications on single field marks. So often a conspicuous feature of a bird becomes overridingly important as our minds try to attach a name to the creature we are studying; because of this we may ignore a suite of more subtle but, in sum, more important characters which militate against the identification that the conspicuous single feature calls for. A frequent example involves albinistic or highly leucistic large gulls. Trained by field guides to base identifications on major "field marks," we read the combination of large size and whiteness to indicate Glaucous Gull. Closer examination (bill color and shape, eye color, body size and proportions, wing length, etc.) usually reveals that these "white" gulls are variants of our more common species (Western, Glaucous-winged, Herring).

Another example of the "Single Field Mark Syndrome" involves our kingbirds. Tropical Kingbirds are regular fall visitors to coastal California; however, during September and early October the Western Kingbird is far more numerous along our coast. I know of at least two cases where fall Western Kingbirds were reported as Tropical Kingbirds (presumably Cassin's was eliminated because of the lack of a conspicuous white chin against a dark gray chest). In each case the identification was based on the lack of white in the outer tail feathers, a condition which obtains rather commonly in fall Western Kingbirds that are either extremely worn or have dropped, but not yet replaced, the outer tail feathers. A whole set of additional characters (bill size, tail color, breast color, back color, auricular color, etc.) would have indicated to the observer that these birds were indeed Western Kingbirds.

This month I'll illustrate the "Single Field Mark Syndrome" with a field problem which actually involves two completely unrelated passerines native to different hemispheres! This fowl-up [*sic*] (and I reiterate that all such fowl-ups have understandable origins and that none of us is immune) has occurred several times in widely separated parts of North America, most recently in a case reported to me from the Sepulveda Basin in the San Fernando Valley.

¹Reprinted with permission as originally published in *Western Tanager* 52(5): 1-2, January/February 1986. *Editor's Note:* Although this article was written for California birders, the principle formulated by the author is a valid caution to birders anywhere. Massachusetts, like California, has a "port-of-entry" position, and furthermore, the confusion that is possible between the Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Pin-tailed Whydah has also occurred in this state according to Richard Forster of Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Imagine a bird the size of a sparrow, with grayish to blackish upperparts, a black crown, whitish underparts, and an absurdly long pair of black tail feathers. This certainly doesn't match anything normally expected to occur in California. A look through the field guide, however, reveals one bird that fits this description: the Fork-tailed Flycatcher. A casual, but somewhat regular, stray to eastern North America (especially the coasts), this Middle and South American species would have to be considered a potential stray to California. [In fact, Monroe and Barron, in their summary of Fork-tailed Flycatcher records from North America (*American Birds* 34: 842-845, 1980), list an 1883 record from Santa Monica, though the purported specimen was destroyed and the record must remain suspicious.] Photographs of the Sepulveda Basin "Fork-tailed Flycatcher," however, quickly revealed it to be a male Pin-tailed Whydah (*Vidua macroura*, a species native to sub-Saharan Africa). Perhaps because of its abundant rank, weedy growth, and proximity to the



Fork-tailed Flycatcher (left) and Pin-tailed Whydah: The Single Field Mark Syndrome
Illustration by Kimball Garrett

thousands of pet shops and private aviaries in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, the Sepulveda Basin attracts its fair share of exotic finches (up to three species of *Euplectes* bishops have been recorded here in a day!). Even so, birders could hardly be expected to be familiar with the names and field marks of every potential exotic in this area. So, again, the identification of this individual as a Fork-tailed Flycatcher, superficially the most similar bird in the North American field guides, becomes entirely understandable.

The accompanying sketch shows how the salient features, and in particular the long, black tail streamers, are similar in these two species. Of course, there are compelling differences in a number of other features (bill shape and color, back color, tail shape, wing pattern, and behavior), but the "Single Field Mark Syndrome" allows these to be overlooked.

One can imagine other scenarios in which an unfamiliar exotic is matched up with the most similar bird in the North American field guides (some of these have, in fact, been reported to me): Yellow-fronted Canary (*Serinus mozambicus*, from Africa) being identified as Dickcissel; female bishops (*Euplectes* spp., from Africa) being identified as Grasshopper Sparrows or fall Bobolinks; Oriental White-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosa*) as Connecticut Warbler; "monster" Mallards (of muddled genetic background) as American Black Ducks, and so forth.

Two points emerge from this discussion. The first, about the danger of basing identifications on single field marks, has been reiterated several times. The second point is especially applicable to areas like southern California, with large human populations, a nearly subtropical climate, and a port-of-entry position on the geographical edge of the United States. This is the problem of exotic birds. The active birder in southern California will likely encounter dozens of species from a potential pool of several hundred) that have escaped from captivity or otherwise occurred unnaturally in the region. One should keep this fact in mind before trying to "fit" an exotic to a species pictured in the local field guides.

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