

In the April issue, Dorothy Arvidson, in her analysis of the photograph of a Common Raven, properly reminded readers of the potential pitfalls associated with identifying birds on the basis of single field marks. With this caution in mind, June's "At a Glance" bird needs to be carefully scrutinized. Clearly a raptor, and equipped with the knowledge that the species occurs in Massachusetts, the photograph can be objectively examined, and the possibilities quickly narrowed. The impression of large size and heavy bulk, coupled with relatively long wings and a massive bill, point to the bird being an eagle, of which three species are known to have occurred in Massachusetts - Bald, White-tailed, and Golden. Of these, only the Bald and Golden eagles occur regularly in the state.

Identification of a photographic silhouette requires us to assess the shape and profile of the eagle, particularly since these features are often among the most useful criteria when identifying any raptor species in flight. However, we cannot ignore two helpful plumage clues that can be detected in the photo. The most apparent is the bicolored tail. Clearly, *the terminal area is dark and has what appears to be a diffuse, pale (gray/white) basal portion.* Additionally, careful examination reveals a *faint suggestion of pale axillaries ("wing-pits").* Keeping these in mind, we now can focus on the proportions of the silhouette.

The tail of our eagle appears rather long in proportion to the bird, but, more importantly, it imparts a *decidedly wedge-shaped aspect*, not the full, rounded, Buteo-like tail typical of the familiar Red-tailed Hawk. Furthermore, *the bird's massive bill and head give the eagle a long-necked appearance so that the projection in front of the wings appears to be at least as great as half the length of the bird's tail.* A final feature, and one not terribly obvious in the photograph, is *the somewhat parallel appearance of the bird's trailing and leading wing margins.* Collectively, the features described above suggest that the pictured eagle is a subadult Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), probably slightly older than a first-year immature on the basis of the extensiveness of the whitish basal area of the tail.

Eliminating the other possible eagle species can be accomplished by noting that Golden Eagles usually display a more rounded, if not longer, tail than Bald Eagles do. Also, the white basal area on an immature Golden Eagle's tail is more sharply defined, and the white extends all the way to the outer edge of the tail, whereas in subadult Bald Eagles, the pale area on the tail is always bordered by (at least) a narrow dark outer edge. Most importantly, however, the projection of the neck, head, and bill in front of a Golden Eagle's wings is generally less than half the length of the tail. This head-to-tail ratio is a most useful field mark. Finally, soaring Golden Eagles often present a

noticeable bulge on the trailing edge of the wings, at just about the point where the secondaries and the primaries come together. This impression is somewhat exaggerated by the greater constriction of the wings at their base than that found in the wings of Bald Eagles. The net effect on wing shape is to give the Golden Eagle's wings a less parallel aspect to the leading and trailing edges.

The accidental White-tailed Eagle can be distinguished at once from the Bald Eagle by its stubby, wedge-shaped tail, its very broad, nearly rectangular-winged silhouette, and its proportionally longer neck and head. The immature Bald Eagle pictured was photographed in Chatham, Massachusetts in July of 1985.

Wayne R. Petersen



Immature Bald Eagle

Photo by Roger Everett

BEST RESPONSE FROM A READER

As for the eagle photo (June), it's a tossup in some respects. (Wings are too big for anything but an eagle.) Length of head versus length of tail has me leaning toward Bald, but it's close. Shape of wings suggests Golden, but I'm not sure — they don't seem *that* pinched. White areas are evident in the *middle* of the tail and armpits, and that's what makes me choose Bald Eagle. (The raven was easy. . . .)

Jim Berry, Ipswich

At a Glance . . .

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird? Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*.



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