

April's At a Glance bird is a toughy! While perhaps obvious to real shorebird aficionados, the writer hazards the opinion that for most readers this photograph may be among the more challenging to appear in *Bird Observer* in many months. Two factors create complexity in this picture. First, the reader is deprived of a full view of the normally distinctive bill shape and the bird's frontal pattern. And second, the characteristic feeding behavior of the species is frozen, but not captured, by the camera.

Nonetheless, a critical examination of the photograph reveals several features that are helpful in making a correct identification. First, the mystery shorebird shows a distinctive, if not unique, pale (white) nape, as well as a dark stripe running down the neck and possibly extending forward through the eye although the photo fails to provide a full view. Additionally, the bird's underparts appear unstreaked and otherwise unpatterned, features not shared by many other North American shorebird species. Although the bill is partially under water, its fineness and length readily remove any of the plover species as identification candidates. The dark leg color further removes several sandpiper species from consideration. And finally, a close look at the back shows the suggestion of a dark stripe contrasting with a lighter background color.

The combination of features described can only apply to one species of North American shorebird -- Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*). The small-headed aspect and full-bodied appearance are also typical of this species. The feathers of the sides are fluffed in such a way that the broader of two dark back stripes is obscured, and the position of the bird in the photograph makes the chestnut wash on the breast impossible to see. The dark legs, absence of broad pale margins on the dorsal feathers, and the dark neck stripe and white nape indicate that the individual is an adult. The high contrast between neck stripe and white nape mark the bird as a female -- the more colorful of the two sexes in this sexually dimorphic species.

Behaviorally, the pictured bird is shown in a typical feeding posture, but this offers little to help with identification. Had the bird been swimming and dabbing with its bill, the identification would have been considerably simplified. The Wilson's Phalarope pictured was photographed by Oliver Komar at Plum Island on May 13, 1984.



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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