

The shorebird depicted as June's mystery species is at once recognizable as one of the three species of phalaropes. Collectively, phalaropes are recognizable in nonbreeding plumage by their distinctive dusky eye patches and their frequent habit of swimming when foraging rather than walking on mudflats or sand. This swimming trait is especially characteristic of Red-necked and Red phalaropes. In Massachusetts only Wilson's Phalarope is likely to be seen regularly foraging on land, where it can then be readily distinguished by its very long straight thin bill, pale gray eye patch, slender neck, yellowish legs, unpatterned dark wings, and white rump patch in flight.

The stout bill, blackish eye patch, and rather short thick neck of the pictured phalarope eliminate Wilson's Phalarope. Having narrowed the options, it is necessary to concentrate on the structure of the bill and the coloration and pattern of the mystery bird's back. Clearly, the bill is thick at the base, tapering gradually to a blunt tip. The fresh unpatterned mantle and scapular feathers on the upper parts fail to show any broad white fringes or dark central streaks, thereby giving the back an even, light gray appearance quite devoid of any streaking other than the dark areas of retained juvenile plumage on the lower neck. This combination of characteristics clearly indicates that the bird in the photograph is a Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicaria*) molting from juvenal into basic (winter) plumage.

A Red-necked Phalarope in corresponding plumage would possess a nearly uniformly thin needle-like bill with a pointed tip, and its upperparts would show a streaked appearance due to a combination of dark central streaks and broad white fringes on the back and scapular feathers. Also, the Red-necked Phalarope normally has a smaller headed appearance and a slimmer neck than the chunky-looking Red Phalarope. A caveat on the back pattern of Red Phalaropes concerns juveniles in late summer, which often display a somewhat blotchy appearance as the pale gray basic feathers of winter grow in and contrast with the dark-centered and buffy-fringed feathers of the juvenal plumage. This feather contrast can be misconstrued as the streaked pattern of similarly aged Red-necked Phalaropes. Bill shape and overall structure should serve to distinguish such individuals. Most pelagic phalaropes seen in Massachusetts are well along into their basic molt, making the identification of juveniles a little



easier. Observers are reminded that under many pelagic conditions specific phalarope identification is often impossible and that some individuals are not safely distinguished in the field unless excellent views are obtained.

*The exceptional view of the Red Phalarope in the picture was obtained by Alan Bennett as the bird swam in a pool at the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge on October 15, 1988.*

## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by A. H. Morgan (Courtesy of MAS)



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