

Most notable about October's mystery species is the bold pattern of white bars and spots on the wings, particularly on the primaries. No other eastern landbirds possess this distinctive series of white markings except several species of woodpeckers. The impression that the pictured bird might be a woodpecker is further reinforced by the shape and the proplike posture of the tail.

Despite the fact that the bird's head is concealed, it is possible to note that the underparts are whitish and that the flanks are unbarred. Although the back appears to be uniformly dark, the bird is turned in such a way that both posture and shading may be obscuring the actual nature of the dorsal pattern. The Black-backed Woodpecker possesses a uniformly dark back, but it would also exhibit prominently barred sides and flanks. The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, which also shows white primary spots, has a large white patch on the wing coverts, not white-spotted wing bars as shown on the bird in the photograph. Ultimately the most useful feature for identifying the pictured bird is the presence of prominent black bars on the outer tail feathers. These markings immediately eliminate the Hairy Woodpecker as a possibility.

Thus the relatively small size of the bird, especially when compared to the poison ivy berries on which it is feeding (provided you recognized them), along with the black bars on the outer tail feathers, the spotted primaries, unbarred flanks, and the lack of a white wing-patch all indicate that the mystery bird is a Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), the smallest and most numerous woodpecker in Massachusetts. If the bird's head were visible, the short stubby bill and rather neckless appearance would further separate the pictured bird from the larger and similar Hairy Woodpecker. The Downy Woodpecker shown here was photographed on Martha's Vineyard.



Downy Woodpecker

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE

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Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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