

The most immediate problem in identifying June's mystery photograph lies in placing the bird into its correct family. Big-headed, small-billed, and seemingly uniform in its coloration, the bird appears to offer little in the way of distinctive field marks. The most outstanding plumage characteristics are the obviously pale cheek, forehead, and collar behind the neck, and the presence of a dark cap and nape, including an extension of dark coloration onto the side of the face behind the pale cheek.

The appearance of the head and bill are actually sufficient to identify the bird. Clearly, the bill's pointed shape eliminates seed-eating birds, and it is too stout to be a warbler's. The absence of a hooked tip to the bill means that flycatchers and shrikes can also be eliminated as possibilities. The fact that the pictured bird does not belong to any of these large families leaves few other viable identification possibilities.

As a point of fact, no other North American species possesses the combination of white cheeks, dark nape, light forehead, and small pointed bill than the Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*) in adult plumage. Gray Jays exhibit considerable geographical variation in the extent of dark coloration on the crown, nape, and underparts. Individuals from southern Rocky Mountain populations, for example, have notably whiter heads than birds from Alaska, which possess more extensively dark caps and napes, and which tend to be whiter below than other races. Regardless of the subspecies involved, the general pattern of the head, the shape of the bill, and the soft, fluffy appearance to the plumage all serve to identify the Gray Jay in the photograph.

The bird in the picture was photographed in Alaska by Simon Perkins.



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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