

## MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Barry W. Van Dusen's exquisite artwork has often been seen on *Bird Observer's* cover, and he recently mesmerized the audience at a Nuttall Ornithological Club meeting at Harvard University with his field sketches, descriptions of how he goes about his craft, and breathtaking closeups of some of his paintings. *Bird Observer* is very grateful to Barry for his contributions of artwork. Barry's work will be in the Lyme Invitational Wildlife in Art Show at the Lyme Art Association Gallery in Old Lyme, CT, on June 5 and 6, 1993. For more information on upcoming exhibits or artwork available for sale, Barry can be reached at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, Massachusetts, 01541. M. Steele

## AT A GLANCE February 1993 \_\_\_\_\_ Wayne R. Petersen



Photos: S. Perkins (upper r.), W. Ervin (lower r.), and W. Petersen (l). Courtesy of MAS.

The twentieth anniversary issue of *Bird Observer* offered three "At A Glance" mystery photographs. Rather than depicting regularly occurring Massachusetts birds, the species shown in the pictures were from the list of *Best Birds in Massachusetts: 1973-1992* (see page 22 of the February 1993 issue). The photographs illustrate several relevant points about identifying a possible vagrant species: 1) some vagrants may be easily identified with the assistance of any of the leading North American field guides; 2) some vagrants may not safely be identified from photographs or in the field, even with the best of field guides; and 3) some vagrants may not be shown in North American field guides.

To demonstrate point number one, the best example is the bird pictured in the lower right photograph. Clearly a gull species of some sort, the pictured bird's dusky face, long black-tipped primaries, black-speckled wing coverts, and pigeonlike profile instantly identify it as an Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) in first-winter plumage. A quick perusal through the better field guides should make this identification fairly simple. In immature plumage, an Ivory Gull, like the one photographed at Salisbury in 1975, is practically unmistakable.

The handheld bird in the upper right photograph illustrates the point that some vagrants cannot safely be identified from a photograph or sometimes even in the field. From the photograph, the fine pointed bill, prominent eye crescents, and slim proportions indicate that the bird is a warbler. Furthermore, its lack of wing bars and ventral streaks, along with indistinct shading on the throat and upper breast, indicate that it is one of three similar species in the genus *Oporornis*. The Connecticut Warbler can be eliminated because that species displays a complete white eye ring and always has a distinct brownish breast band. This leaves the Mourning Warbler and its western counterpart, the MacGillivray's Warbler, as possibilities. The indistinctness of the breast band suggests that the pictured warbler is an immature, which leaves only the distinct eye crescents as obvious clues. These eye crescents are seldom as bold or wide in a Mourning Warbler. In addition, the color slide of the pictured warbler shows a pale grayish throat, not yellow as in the Mourning Warbler. While this combination of features suggests that the pictured bird may be a MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmiei*), it was not without first obtaining definitive wing and tail measurements during banding that this MacGillivray's Warbler in Lexington in 1977 was positively identified.

The remaining mystery photograph shows a bird not illustrated or described in any of the North American field guides. In this case, the first step in making a correct identification is to place the bird in its correct family, which in this case is the swallow family. The pictured bird's rather long neck, large bill, and long wings make it look large for a swallow, especially a Bank Swallow, which it otherwise resembles because of its broad breast band. Also unlike a Bank Swallow, it possesses a series of bold ventral spots extending down the mid-breast below the breast band. Indeed, European and Neotropical field guides show that only the Brown-chested Martin (*Phaeoprogne tapera*) of South America has these proportions and this pattern. In addition to the martin's brown dorsal color (not discernable in the photo), the extensive breast spots are notable because they indicate that the bird is of the migratory southern South American race, therefore making it the race most likely to show up as a vagrant in North America. Although this species' visit to Monomoy Island in 1983 provided an especially challenging identification problem, careful analysis of its characteristics can still make the identification possible. Birders simply need to remember that not all vagrant birds will appear in their standard field guides.

## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Tom Martin



Can you identify this bird?

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