

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Julie Zickefoose is an artist, writer, and naturalist who is devoted to the study, conservation, and appreciation of nature. Educated at Harvard University in biology and art, Julie worked six years as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy before turning to full-time freelance art. She contributes regularly to magazines from *Ladybug* to *Bird Watcher's Digest*, for which she is a contributing editor. Book illustration credits include the Academy of Natural Sciences, for which she is contributing illustrations to the multi-volume work *The Birds of North America*.

Julie has shown her work at Harvard University, the National Zoo, the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, and the XIX International Ornithological Congress. She also sings and plays in a band, The Swinging Orangutans, whose members include her husband, Bill Thompson III, editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Julie can be reached at Indigo Hill Arts, Route 1, Box 270, Whipple, Ohio 45788.

M. Steele

AT A GLANCE *August 1996* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

The most outstanding feature of the mystery bird on the nest is its large, conical bill, which indicates that the bird might be a finch, bunting, or sparrow of some kind. If so, the size of the bill suggests that the bird would have to be a fairly large representative of this group. Additionally, because the bird appears to be incubating, it is probably a female.

If all of the above is true, Blue Grosbeak emerges as a candidate. However, female Blue Grosbeaks have prominent buffy wing bars. The pictured bird clearly lacks wing bars. Furthermore, this species would likely have a more abrupt forehead, not the flat-headed appearance of the bird in the photo. A female Indigo Bunting, a somewhat miniaturized version of the Blue Grosbeak, would have a proportionately smaller and slightly more rounded bill and would likely display indistinct buffy wing bars. Again, not a good match.

A close examination of the bird on the nest reveals a peculiar scaled appearance to the nape and crown, as well as a decidedly flat-headed aspect to the head and bill. These features, along with the virtual absence of any other conspicuous field marks, leave few other possibilities.

At this point, the nest itself might provide a final clue. For those readers who have taken an interest in birds' nests through the years, or who have started to use the past couple of At A Glance photographs to begin thinking about nests, the tidy bark and lichen-decorated, semipendant cup in the photograph quite probably belongs to a vireo of some sort. However, the bird on the nest is clearly not a vireo! So, we have established that although the bird looks like a grosbeak or bunting, it is not, and while the nest resembles that of a vireo, the bird sitting on the nest is not a vireo. Where does this leave the mystery bird?

There is really only one large-billed, nondescript, and slightly scaly backed bird that matches the bird in the photograph: a female Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*). The bill shape and flat-headed profile are the best clues in the picture, along with the fact that the bird looks awfully large for the nest it is sitting on. Brown-headed Cowbirds are brood parasites that lay their eggs in the nests of other smaller songbirds. They do not build a nest of their own. Cowbird young are then raised by foster parents, often at the expense of the parent bird's own young. This reproductive strategy has been so successful that some ornithologists are getting concerned about the effect of burgeoning cowbird numbers in some regions of the country. In Massachusetts Brown-headed Cowbirds are common during migration and in summer and are uncommon in winter.

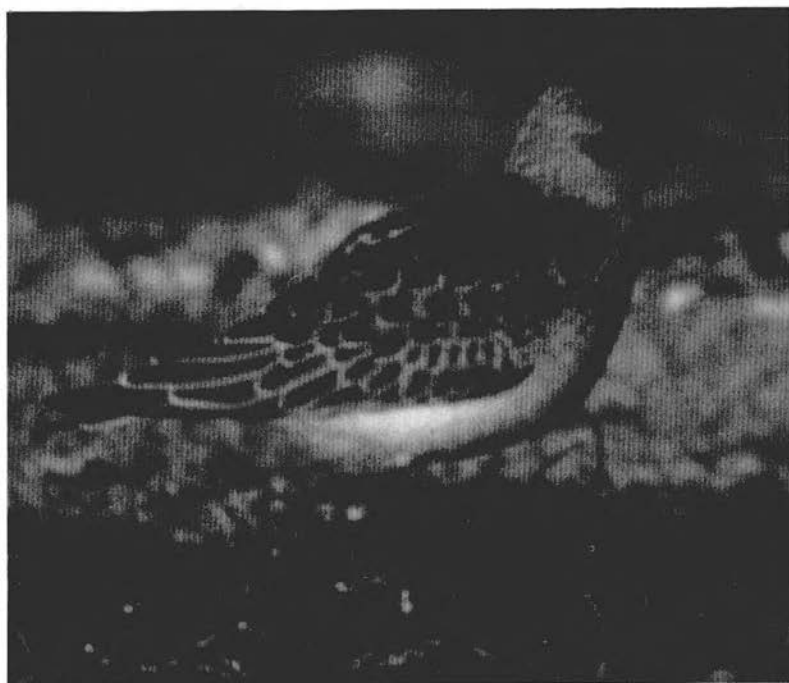


Photo by Hal H. Harrison

Courtesy of MAS

AT A GLANCE

Photo by M. Rines



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