

The December mystery photograph provides a textbook view of what is obviously an incubating adult of an unidentified species. As has been suggested in previous analyses of mystery photographs, the reader is encouraged to take advantage of every available clue when trying to determine the identity of an unidentified bird photograph. In this instance, we have the distinct advantage of seeing the structure and placement of the bird's nest, which in this case is a valuable clue.



Photograph by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr.

But before considering the nest, a careful examination of the photograph reveals a passerine with prominent wing bars; an obviously wide and rather flat bill; the suggestion of a slightly crested appearance to the head; no obvious eye ring; an even-toned, unmarked back; rather long, pointed primaries; and a hint of contrast may exist between a pale throat and a dusky chest. On the strength of the breadth of the bill, even tone of the back, and conspicuous wing bars, it is fair to assume that the bird is a flycatcher of some sort. There are no other Massachusetts bird species that manifest this combination of features without also exhibiting some other distinctive characteristic.

However, any birder worth his/her salt knows that establishing an unidentified bird as a flycatcher may only be the beginning of the problem! Flycatchers are notoriously difficult to distinguish in the field, particularly when they are not calling. Consequently, a thoughtful consideration of all the evidence available in the photograph is necessary in order to accurately identify the mystery bird.

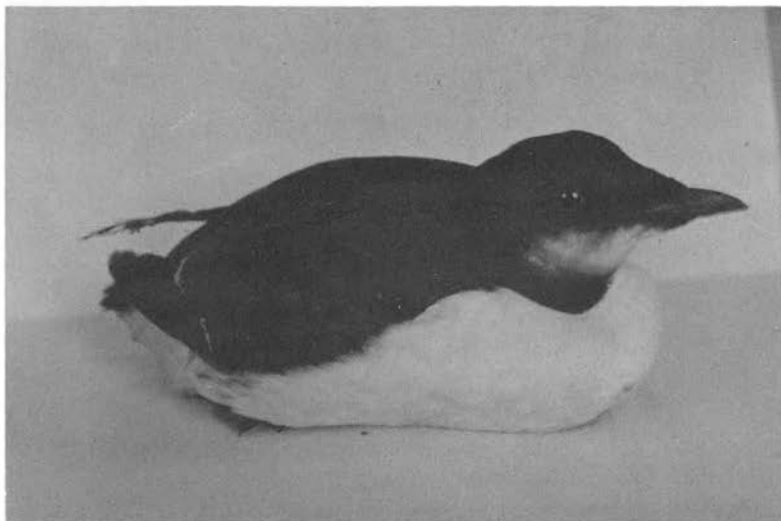
Perhaps the most important feature to note on the mystery flycatcher is its lack of a conspicuous eye ring. This characteristic alone is sufficient to eliminate most of the small Empidonax flycatchers, since all but the Willow (and to a lesser extent, the Alder) Flycatcher have bold and conspicuous eye rings. With this in mind, the choices quickly become narrowed to either a Willow (or possibly Alder) Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, or Olive-sided Flycatcher. Here is where the construction and placement of the nest are helpful. Willow and Alder flycatchers characteristically build cup-nests which are placed in a fork or crotch of low bushes or shrubs, generally more or less shielded by leaves. The nest construction of these two empids normally consists of lots of plant fibers, often giving their nests a silvery and silky appearance, not unlike the nest of a Yellow Warbler — a species regularly found sharing the breeding habitat of both species in Massachusetts. Alder Flycatcher nests usually contain more grasses and are less compact than those of Willow Flycatchers, thus constituting one of the characteristics used in taxonomically separating these two otherwise very similar sibling species.

In contrast, Olive-sided Flycatcher nests tend to be moss or *Usnea* lichen-covered open cups that are saddled high on a horizontal conifer branch, usually well concealed among needles or twigs on the supporting structure. Keeping these nest features in mind, it should be noted that Eastern Wood-Pewees typically saddle their shallow cup-nests on open, horizontal tree branches, and characteristically trim the outside of the structure with lichens and spiderwebs. This latter description aptly applies to the nest in the mystery photo. When combined with the bird's lack of an eye ring, prominent wing bars, and long, pointed primary extension, the mystery flycatcher can only be an Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*).

Eastern Wood-Pewees are common woodland breeding birds throughout Massachusetts, especially in pine barrens on the coastal plain. They also commonly occur as migrants in late May and early June, and from late August through the end of September.

AT A GLANCE

Photograph by Gilbert Emery



Can you identify this bird?

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

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