

AT A GLANCE

February 2000



Digital image by David M. Larson

A quick glance at the first photo quiz bird of the new millennium at once suggests a hawk of some sort. The apparent size (relative to what appears to be a telephone pole), bulk, tail shape, and “fingered” primaries of the bird reinforce the impression of a hawk, along with the fact that certain hawks often perch on utility poles!

Proceeding on the assumption that the bird is indeed a hawk, the next task is to place the bird in one of the genera of diurnal raptors commonly found in Massachusetts. To assist in this process, some fundamental distinctions between these genera will be reviewed, since most of the hawks in the Commonwealth (in fact in North America) belong in the genus *Buteo*, *Accipiter*, or *Falco*.

Buteos (e.g., Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, Red-tailed, and Rough-legged hawk) are generally large, chunky, broad-winged species with relatively short, fan-shaped tails. They are often seen soaring in lazy circles in the sky or sitting quietly on exposed perches at field edges or along roadsides while looking for small rodents. Red-shouldered and Broad-winged hawks also regularly forage under the forest canopy. Accipiters (e.g., Sharp-shinned, Cooper’s, and Northern Goshawks) are characterized by having long, maneuverable tails, relatively short, rounded wings, small heads, and a flap-and-glide flight style. When perched, accipiters often sit in the middle of a tree rather than in the open, and ordinarily they rely on stealth and surprise when hunting birds (their preferred prey), instead of rapid aerial pursuit like falcons. Falcons (e.g., American Kestrel, Merlin, Gyrfalcon, and Peregrine Falcon) are more streamlined than either buteos or accipiters and have rather long, pointed wings (usually with a distinct bend at the “elbow”) and fairly long, slender tails. With the exception of the little


American Kestrel, falcons typically rely on their strong, open-air flying ability to pursue and strike down their prey while on the wing.

The Northern Harrier, which is not in one of these genera, is also a common Massachusetts raptor; however, it can be eliminated from consideration because the mystery bird lacks the conspicuous white rump patch of a harrier. Similarly, the finely banded tail of the pictured bird serves to remove both Golden and Bald Eagle from consideration. Eliminating the Osprey is slightly more difficult, yet a discerning look at the portion of the bird's head just visible above the right wing reveals a uniformly dark nape and top to the head – areas that would be whitish in an Osprey. Also, the bird fails to give the very dark appearance typical of an adult Osprey, or the spangled look of a juvenile, with its prominently fringed wing coverts, scapulars, and back feathers. By process of elimination the bird has to be a *buteo*, *accipiter*, or falcon.

Keeping the features summarized above in mind, the pictured bird appears most like a *buteo* for several reasons. First, it was perched on a pole. Second, it has a rather short, fan-shaped tail which shows well as the bird takes flight. And third, the wings are quite broad (best judged by the bird's left wing) and are distinctly patterned on the under-primary coverts (in the "wrist" area). Clearly, the wings and tail are too broad and the wings are not pointed enough to be those of a falcon. Similarly, the length and shape of the tail are wrong for an *accipiter*; also, an *accipiter* would not have the strongly marked greater primary coverts on the underwing shown by the bird in the picture. The hawk has to be a *buteo*.

Fortunately the picture provides a clear view of the upper tail — a critical feature in correctly aging the bird. If the bird were in adult plumage the distinctive, alternating black-and-white tail bands of a Red-shouldered or Broad-winged Hawk would be obvious. Likewise, the base of the tail would be more extensively white if the bird was a light morph Rough-legged Hawk of any age; a dark Rough-leg would show solidly dark underwing linings. Since the bird shows a uniformly, finely barred tail, it is safe to assume that the hawk in the photograph is a juvenile *buteo*.

At this point, identification becomes more straightforward. The combination of a fairly prominent "wrist mark" created by the dark underprimary coverts, the *hint* of a dark patagial mark visible on the leading edge of the left wing, and the contrasting, pale outer portion of the right upperwing all suggest Red-tailed Hawk. When these features are combined with the apparent bulk of the bird, the width of its wings, amplitude of its tail, and the fact that it was sitting on a pole, identification of the *buteo* as a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) can be assured.

Red-tailed Hawks are common, year-round residents throughout Massachusetts, including urban city parks, wherever there are open areas for them to hunt small rodents. Red-tails are particularly numerous during spring and fall migration. The juvenile Red-tailed Hawk in the picture was photographed at the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary in Marshfield, MA. 

Wayne R. Petersen

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Photograph by Carole D'Angelo



Can you identify this bird?

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

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