

AT A GLANCE

April 2000



Photograph by Carole D'Angelo

For the second issue in a row, the At A Glance photo depicts a seemingly headless bird! Unlike February's photo of a young Red-tailed Hawk, however, the apparent "headlessness" of the bird in the picture is due not so much to the angle of the image in the photograph as to the actual structure of the bird. With this as a clue, an obvious first point to consider when trying to identify the pictured bird is to think of relatively large birds that typically appear short-necked and blunt- or round-headed. One group of birds that should immediately come to mind is owls — those quintessential nocturnal hunters that go hoot in the night! Most owls are also characterized by having relatively short tails (the Northern Hawk Owl is an exception), fairly long, rounded wings, and muted brown feather patterning. Some species also have distinct feather tufts on the head (e.g., Great Horned Owl).

Clearly, the bird in the April photograph has the features described above, so it is fair to assume that the bird is some species of owl. Furthermore, since the photograph was apparently taken with natural light, not flash, it was undoubtedly taken during the daytime or at least not at night. This is an important clue, since a well-known fact about owls is that most species do most of their hunting under a cloak of darkness, not in bright daylight. The owl species most apt to be seen foraging in the daytime in Massachusetts are the Snowy Owl and Short-eared Owl; however, it is also possible to occasionally encounter a diurnal hunting Barn Owl, Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, or Long-eared Owl. Deep snow, extreme cold, or when they have young are conditions that apparently encourage these last four species to sometimes hunt in the daytime. Since the


owl in the photograph is hunting over snow, the reader cannot automatically preclude any of these occasional daytime hunters.

Considering this list of owl possibilities, several can at once be eliminated. The Snowy Owl, even the plumage of the duskiest immature, would possess an overall whiter background color and would seldom show such extensive barring on the tail. Similarly, a Barn Owl would normally appear much lighter in dorsal coloration, would show a different and less intricate feather patterning on the wing coverts, and would appear to have a longer neck and much longer legs, even from the angle provided by the photograph. If the photo was depicting the powerful and hefty Great Horned Owl, the bird would appear more uniformly dark above, and it would probably be possible to see the conspicuous feather tufts on the head, even though these are somewhat drawn back in flight. A Barred Owl would, like the Great Horned Owl, appear broader winged, darker above, and would show more obvious white spotting on the wing coverts. Also, Barred Owls tend to be forest owls that do most of their foraging in wooded situations, not open grassy areas as suggested by the surroundings in the photograph.

With the above assumptions in mind, identification possibilities for the owl in the photo are reduced to either Short-eared Owl or Long-eared Owl — two owl species that are very similar and easily confused in flight! Both of these owls forage in the open, typically over grassy meadows or marshes — habitats often shared and similarly hunted by Northern Harriers during daylight hours. Unfortunately, many birders are seemingly unaware of just how similar these two medium-sized owls can be in flight, despite some rather distinct flight differences that help to separate them. Since behavior is of no use in the photograph, the reader is left only with a dorsal view to work with. Obviously, the “long ears” and dark facial disks of the Long-eared Owl are not visible in the picture, so other clues become important.

Fortunately, because of the sharp quality of the photo and the strong illumination provided by the snow beneath the bird, there are two important features that are obvious in the picture that might otherwise not be able to be seen. One of these is a noticeably pale buff or whitish trailing edge to the secondaries. The other is prominent barring on the spread tail, with at least four distinct and widely spaced bands visible in the picture. These two features make it possible to conclusively identify the owl in the photo as a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). Long-eared Owls do not ordinarily show a contrasting pale trailing edge to the secondaries in flight, and their tails are more finely and uniformly barred, thus giving a less obviously banded pattern to the tail. In flight, Short-eared Owls have a more buoyant, floating, and erratic flight than Long-eared Owls; Long-ears are more prone to making fairly sharp turns in flight following several deep wing strokes. In general, they appear less “moth-like” than Short-eared Owls.

Short-eared Owls are regular early spring and late fall migrants in Massachusetts, especially along the coast. Small and variable numbers also winter in coastal areas and in areas where there are extensive fields and lots of Meadow Voles for them to feed on. The Short-eared is state endangered as a breeding bird in Massachusetts, with the few remaining nesting pairs located primarily on the offshore islands of Tuckernuck, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard.

Carole D'Angelo took this photograph of a Short-eared Owl at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. 

Wayne R. Petersen

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Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

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

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