

## AT A GLANCE

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June 2001




*Photograph by Roger S. Everett*

June's At A Glance photo depicts a bird whose bill shape suggests that it feeds primarily on insects – it is fine and sharp-pointed. Additionally, the unambiguous presence of visible white spots on the underside of the tail suggests that the bird might be a warbler of some sort. American Pipits also possess fine-pointed bills, as well as streaked underparts and white in the outer tail feathers similar to the bird in the photograph; however, a pipit would display entirely white outer tail feathers and would lack the narrow black margins and black tips shown in the outer tail feathers of the pictured bird. Furthermore, the hind claw of a pipit perched on a wire – an unlikely event in its own right – would appear much longer than the claws on the front toes, which is certainly not the case with the bird in the photograph.

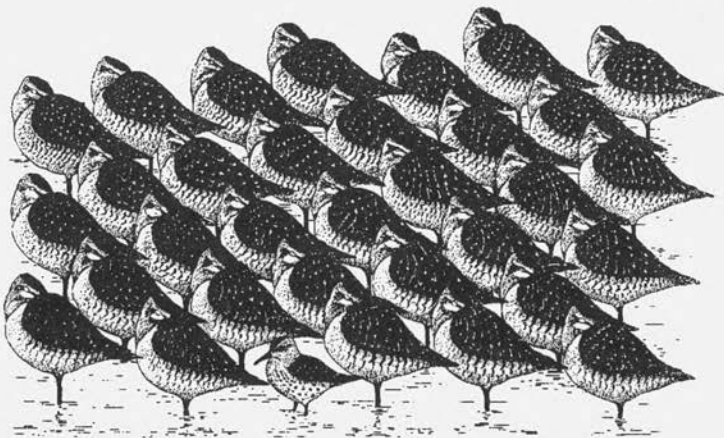
With these thoughts in mind, a careful examination of the pictured bird reveals several additional distinct features. First, it is obvious that the bird belongs in a group of warblers that possesses a combination of features including white tail spots, wing bars, and streaked underparts. This combination of features immediately eliminates a great many warbler species from consideration as identification candidates. In this category are all species in the genera *Vermivora*, *Oporornis*, and *Seiurus*, as well as American Redstart, Prothonotary Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler, Canada Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat. The remaining possibilities all belong to the genus *Dendroica*, the largest genus of North American warblers.

Having determined that the pictured warbler is in the genus *Dendroica*, it becomes important to concentrate on the other features that are visible in the picture. Starting at the head, the mystery species has rather prominent whitish eyelids, a dark auricular area (i.e., cheeks), a pale supercilium (i.e., eyebrow stripe) that is most noticeable behind the eye, and a pale throat that seems to extend around the side of the neck under the dark auriculars. On the basis of these features, along with others already described, warblers that need to be considered are Magnolia, Cape May, Yellow-rumped, Pine, and Palm. Magnolia Warbler can be eliminated by its distinctive tail pattern, which is white with a broad dark tip. Cape May Warbler would appear shorter-tailed, much more heavily streaked on the underparts, and would have less prominent wing bars. A Pine Warbler, while it might show a similar face pattern, would not display the streaks clearly discernable on the scapulars (i.e., shoulders) and back of the pictured bird, and would also typically have a longer and heavier bill. Finally, a Palm Warbler would never display such bold wing bars and would possess a conspicuous and more extensive supercilium and a dark line through the eye.

With this analysis completed, it turns out that the mystery warbler is none other than a Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*), one of the most abundant warbler species, both in Massachusetts and throughout North America. Returning briefly to the undertail pattern mentioned at the outset of this analysis, it should be noted that the black areas above the white tail spots are more extensive than in any other similar warbler except the Palm Warbler. In actuality, the photographed bird can practically be identified on the basis of the undertail pattern alone. This is something to think about the next time you are viewing a Yellow-rumped Warbler from below.

Roger S. Everett photographed the Yellow-rumped Warbler in first fall plumage on Cape Cod. Yellow-rumped Warblers are present in Massachusetts throughout the year, but are most numerous during spring and autumn migration, when sometimes they virtually swarm in appropriate habitats. They breed commonly in the western parts of the Bay State, and in some winters, their numbers on Cape Cod can be impressive. 

Wayne R. Petersen



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Photograph by David Larson



Can you identify this bird?

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

### **Northern Harriers Nesting on Plum Island**

An adult male and female Northern Harrier have been seen sporadically on the refuge all spring. Back in May Rebecca Schwer reported seeing a female carrying grasses over the Hellcat Marsh. This afternoon [6/21/01], just south of the stone marker in the field opposite the "new pines," I observed an adult male circling low over the cattail marsh carrying a mouse. Almost immediately a female popped up out of the cattails directly below and began circling with the male. After just a few minutes the male passed the prey to the female, and shortly thereafter she dropped back into the very same spot in the cattails. Almost certainly this indicates a nest with young in the marsh. Harriers, a state-listed species, have not been proven to nest on the refuge, or for that matter, in Essex County, in many decades.

*Richard Heil, Parker River NWR*