

## AT A GLANCE

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October 2002



PAUL KINNALLY


A quick look at this month's mystery photograph reveals an obvious passerine species of some sort, but which one? Rapid assessment of the most obvious characteristics suggests that the bird is chunky in overall shape, with a relatively long, straight bill and a rather short tail, especially for a bird as seemingly large as the pictured individual. Also apparent is an unmarked, pale throat, what appear to be white markings (spots?) on the underparts, and a uniformly colored head and back. Additionally, as has been suggested in previous descriptions in this column, a careful look at the surrounding vegetation or other habitat features in an "At A Glance" photo can sometimes offer additional supporting clues about the identity of a depicted species. In this instance, the obvious berries on the long, slender, drooping vines in the photograph suggest that the bird is sitting on a multiflora rose bush (*Rosa multiflora*), thus affording something of a reality check on the approximate size of the mystery bird.

The chunky body, spotted underparts, and uniform appearance of the back and wings are somewhat suggestive of a thrush; however, the bill is too straight and pointed and the tail is too short to belong to a thrush. A Brown Thrasher would possess an even longer tail than a thrush, would display prominent white wing bars, and would have streaked, not spotted underparts. The lengthy pointed bill is somewhat reminiscent of a Northern Flicker; however, the absence of horizontal bars on the back and the suggestion of a dark collar on the upper breast, as well as the way the bird is perched in the top of a bush, all argue against the mystery bird being a

flicker. Another possibility, based on shape, would be an Eastern Meadowlark, except that meadowlarks also have strongly streaked and patterned backs, a distinct stripe above the eye, and dark V-shaped marking on the breast.

Further reflection on the shape of the bird, especially its resemblance to a meadowlark, is tantamount to identifying the mystery bird correctly. There are relatively few species in Massachusetts that share the combination of chunky body, short tail, long, pointed bill, uniform back, and spotted underparts. In fact, there is only one, the European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Possibly because this ubiquitous European invasive is so abundant, many birders pay less attention to its exact appearance, plumage, or other identifying characteristics than they do to more desirable species such as Baird's Sandpipers or Philadelphia Vireos. Consequently, the features that make the mystery bird absolutely unique may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer.

The starling in the picture is a juvenile molting into its first-winter plumage. Juvenile starlings in mid-summer are a uniform smoky-gray color with a pale throat. By late summer they gradually begin to acquire the white spots and spangles that are typical of their winter plumage. These white spots typically appear first on the underparts, eventually to be followed by similar changes in the appearance of the head and back. The young starling in the photograph is in transition between the uniform gray mid-summer plumage and what will eventually be the rather uniformly spotted winter plumage. Quite likely the bird was photographed in late August or very early September.

European Starlings are abundant year-round residents practically throughout Massachusetts in cities, suburban areas, and areas where farm fields or salt marshes are available for feeding. Although they avoid heavily forested areas, they are found nearly everywhere else. In winter starlings gather each evening into enormous communal roosts, many of which are located in urban areas such as Boston. Paul Kinnaly photographed the European Starling in the picture in Marshfield. 

Wayne R. Petersen


## Looking Back

Twenty-six years ago on 5/28/76, a Western Wood Pewee was seen and heard on Monomoy. It had been recorded just twice before.

Thirty-six years ago on 8/29/66 and 9/11/66, the other two Western Wood Pewees were mist netted and collected, only to have beetles destroy the specimens.

Forty-one years ago on 5/29/66 Northern Cardinals first bred in Massachusetts.

### Joke

Once there was a boy who wanted a bird. He went down to the store and said to the man, "I want some bird seed." The man said, "What kind of bird do you have?" The boy said, "I want to grow one." — Holly Butler, *Bird Observer*, 1973 

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DAVID LARSON

Can you identify this bird?

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

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