

AT A GLANCE

December 2002




DAVID LARSON

Zygodactyly! Yes, this strange word is actually a key to unraveling this month's mystery photo. What does it mean? In the Order Passeriformes (a.k.a. perching birds), the arrangement of the toes on the feet is characteristically one in which three toes are oriented forward and one to the rear, just the way they would be in any self-respecting warbler, sparrow, or bunting. This arrangement, known as anisodactyly, is typical of the vast majority of our everyday songbirds. A close look at the toes of the mystery bird, however, reveals that this is not the toe arrangement of the bird in the photo. We can clearly see that, on the bird's right foot, only two toes are facing forward clutching the branch on which the bird is perched. The remaining two toes are facing backwards, even though this is not discernible in the photo. This configuration of two toes facing forward and two facing backwards is what is meant by zygodactyly. Of the regularly occurring birds in Massachusetts, cuckoos and woodpeckers are the most familiar examples of species exhibiting this unusual condition, although the Osprey and all owl species are capable of rotating their outer toes into a forward configuration that also makes them zygodactylous.

Having established that the pictured bird has a zygodactyl toe arrangement, the task of pinning down its specific identity is simplified considerably. Clearly the bird is neither an Osprey nor an owl, and cuckoos can be eliminated by the presence of a white stripe on the side of the head, even though a branch obscures the bill. Knowing

that the bird is a woodpecker simplifies the task of identifying the species considerably.

Of our local woodpeckers, only the Downy Woodpecker and the Hairy Woodpecker display such a prominent white stripe on the side of the head in combination with a plain white breast. Although the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker has a white stripe on the side of its head, sapsuckers also possess a dark bar across the upper breast that is lacking in the pictured woodpecker. Knowing that the mystery woodpecker is either a Downy or Hairy makes the final identification straightforward, even though the bill is obscured. Certainly, the longer and heavier bill of the Hairy Woodpecker is an easy way to distinguish these two sibling species; however, an equally useful feature is the presence of a series of dark bars on the outer tail feathers of a Downy Woodpecker, a feature lacking in the Hairy. A careful examination of the underside of the tail, what little is visible in the photo, clearly shows the presence of these dark markings, thus establishing that the mystery woodpecker is a Downy Woodpecker (*Picooides pubescens*). Because of the obscured view of the head, it is not possible to ascertain whether the bird is a male or a female.

Downy Woodpeckers are widespread and common permanent residents in Massachusetts, occurring practically wherever there are trees. They regularly visit bird feeders in winter. David Larson obtained the digital image of the Downy Woodpecker in the picture in Hingham, MA. 

Wayne R. Petersen



FORK-TAILED FLYCATCHER BY JIM BAIRD

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Can you identify this bird?

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

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WHY BIRD OBSERVER OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS?

Many birders, newcomers and old-timers, have expressed an interest in and a need for an informative regional publication of purely bird news.

This bi-monthly newsletter plans to cover: where to go for "hard to find" species and seasonal species complete with maps, fine points of identification of confusing species, tips to backyard birders and for those using public transportation, statistics of previous two months plus a two-month forecast, occasional book reviews and conservation notes.

Year-round birding has become a rapidly expanding hobby in this country in recent years. During the 1969 Christmas count over 15,000 people participated, in 1970, 16,700 and in 1971, 18,800 - a gain of 12% per annum, with Massachusetts being one of the most active states. These numbers represent only the tip of the iceberg - surely the bulk of enthusiasts are watching backyard feeders.

In order for this publication to serve you and succeed, all clubs and individuals are asked to give support by reporting species, submitting articles, writing letters and questions to the editors, sharing bird interest stories, and giving criticism and suggestions for future expansion.

We look forward to your participation.