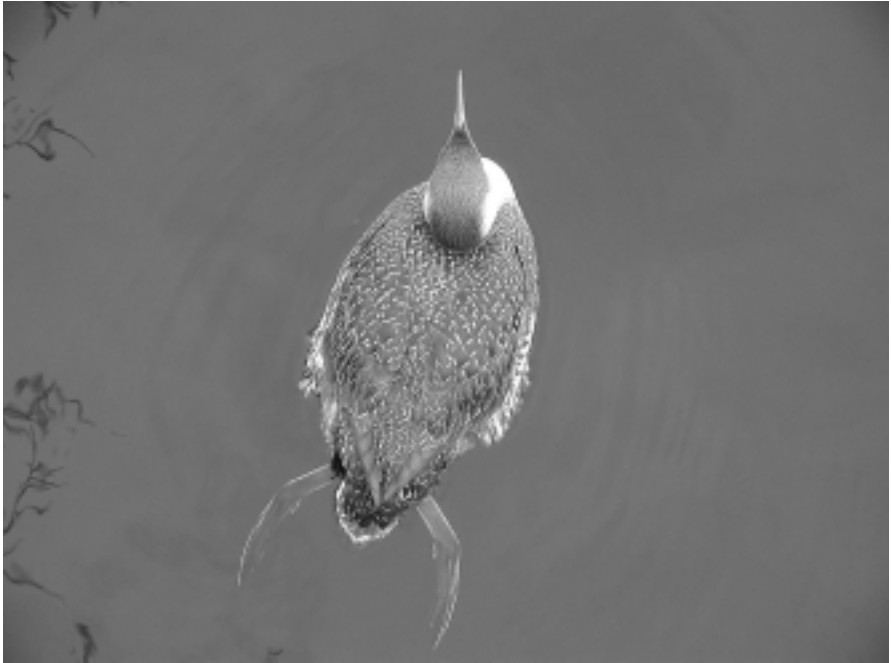


AT A GLANCE

April 2003



MARJORIE RINES

Sometimes field identification problems occur in strange ways, with different examples having been periodically enumerated in these pages. Undoubtedly one of the most frequent identification difficulties has to do with the view obtained of a mystery species. This month, the reader is clearly confronted with such a situation.


The first task when viewing the April mystery bird is to determine the context of the bird in the picture. Since it appears that there is foliage or leaves at the left of the picture, there is an initial suggestion that the bird is adjacent to a tree or shrub. Upon closer inspection, however, it seems obvious that the bird cannot possibly be in flight or be perched near a plant, either. Although the bird could conceivably be lying flat on the ground with leaves nearby, what is the surface made of that it's lying on that could appear so totally without texture?

Rather than lead the possibly befuddled reader down a garden path, let me simply offer the fact that the bird is in water, not on land. While it seems remarkable that there are few other clues that the background medium is water, the *very* discerning reader might just be able to make out that the leaves in the left of the picture resemble those of *Potamogeton* sp. – a large genus of common, aquatic pond weeds. Once the fact that the bird is in the water is clearly established, the perspective of the picture

becomes more obvious. The image must have been obtained from directly overhead, the only plane that could possibly provide such a view.

Now that the mystery species has clearly been determined to be a waterbird of some sort, the identification process is considerably simplified. The fact that the bird has a long, pointed bill at once eliminates all waterfowl species, including mergansers, which never possess finely speckled upperparts. Similarly, cormorants and alcids (except the Black Guillemot in winter plumage, which always shows large white wing-patches) are uniformly black in color above, not pale gray and finely speckled with white. A juvenile Northern Gannet would have a substantially longer tail and would be less white below, and none of the black-and-white shearwater species would be speckled on the back. They would also possess conspicuous tubes on their upper mandible. With the field thus narrowed, the mystery bird has to be either a loon or a grebe.

Knowing this, the identification is easy. Only the Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) in winter plumage has the combination of a pale gray back finely speckled with white, an immaculately white neck, a pale gray head, and a thin pointed bill. Although the juveniles of other loon species exhibit pale barring on the dark feathers of their back and scapulars, none have the fine spots shown by the pictured loon. Likewise, the generally darker back and top of the head of Horned, Red-necked, Eared, and Western (and Clark's) grebes are uniformly dark and unspotted.

Red-throated Loons are common to very common coastal fall and spring migrants in Massachusetts, and small numbers regularly appear inland, especially in the fall. In most years, modest numbers spend the winter off Cape Cod and the Islands, but in summer the species is quite unusual in Bay State waters. Marjorie Rines took the spectacular digital image of the Red-throated Loon at Mystic Lake in Arlington. 

Wayne R. Petersen



PILEATED WOODPECKER BY R.E. JOHNSON

AT A GLANCE



PETER YESKIE

Can you identify this bird?

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

The classification of living birds, or, for that matter, any other large group of animals, is full of hopeless difficulties and insoluble problems.

Ludlow Griscom, 1945

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