

AT A GLANCE

June 2003



PETER YESKIE


What have we this month? A quick look would suggest a bird that is somewhere between a “finchy kind of thing” and a “little brown job.” Obviously, this isn’t terribly helpful, but it least it provides a useful first impression. And, remember, where bird identification is concerned, first impressions can be very important. Over analysis of a bird identification problem can sometimes stymie even the most experienced birders. There’s a lot of truth in the old saying, “If it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck.” With this sage advice in mind, let’s see where our first impression leads us.

Immediate attention should be focused on the mystery bird’s beak. Because the bill structure of a bird is often a key characteristic when trying to place a bird in the appropriate family, this should always be an important first step in field identification. In this case, the bill is thick at the base and conical in shape – a classic profile of finches and sparrows. The combination of what appears to be a rather heavily streaked breast and back, should reinforce our thinking that the bird might be some sort of sparrow or finch. But perhaps even more outstanding is the presence of extensive white on the greater wing coverts. This feature alone is practically sufficient to correctly identify this otherwise nondescript bird.

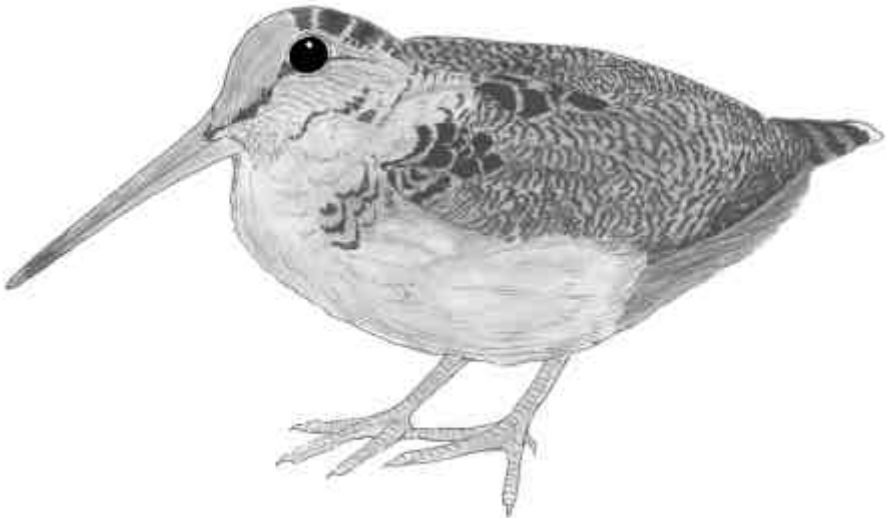
If we believe that the bird is a sparrow or finch, then a closer look at the head is warranted. Such an examination reveals a pale and rather broad supercilium (i.e., eyebrow stripe) running back from the eye (not unlike a female Purple Finch), in addition to a dusky cheek patch with a small pale spot behind it. Additionally the bird

appears to have a distinct, dark, malar (i.e., throat) stripe, along with the previously noted heavy streaking on the underparts. Despite the fact that the wing on the pictured bird is folded in such a way that the primaries are partially hidden, it would seem that the primaries are relatively short (i.e., not suggesting much primary extension) and brownish in color, not black, or in distinct contrast with the rest of the wing feathers.

Taken as a whole, foremost beginning with the fact that the mystery bird has a heavy, sparrow-like bill and a prominent white patch in the wing, the species depicted can only be a Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*). The apparent absence of contrasting black primaries or blackish around the face, along with the extent and degree of whiteness of the wing patch, suggest that the bird in the photo is a female, rather than an immature male or an adult male in winter plumage.

Lark Buntings are rare or casual visitors to Massachusetts, with most records occurring along the immediate coast in early fall; however, there are several spring records and a few reports from inland areas, as well. Peter Yeskie photographed the pictured Lark Bunting in his yard in Hadley, MA, on November 21, 2000. 

Wayne R. Petersen



AMERICAN WOODCOCK BY GEORGE C. WEST

AT A GLANCE



MARJORIE RINES

Can you identify this bird?

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

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