

# AT A GLANCE

---

June 2005



ERIC SMITH


This month we see an obviously little bird, seemingly devoid of conspicuous markings or other outstanding characteristics. Since only the front of the bird is visible, there is not a lot to be said about its wing or tail pattern, although what can be seen of the bird's right wing fails to suggest the presence of prominent wing-bars. Drawing on past experience in evaluating mystery photographs, as well as on direct field observation, it should be recalled that generally the head of an unknown species is an excellent place to begin when trying to make an identification, even on occasions when other aspects of a bird are more visible.

Keeping this thought in mind, let's start by looking carefully at the mystery bird's bill. It is obviously very fine, thin, and rather distinctly curved. The fineness and overall shape of the bill, combined with the overall plainness of the bird, at once remove a great many species as identification possibilities, among them being any of the species with seed-cracking bills (e.g., sparrows, grosbeaks, buntings, etc.). The thinness and fineness of the bill, combined with the absence of a tiny hook at the tip, also take flycatchers and vireos out of the running. This essentially leaves only the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, or some type of a wren or warbler as viable possibilities.

A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher exhibits a bill as fine as the mystery species, although typically a gnatcatcher's bill would be less curved; also, a gnatcatcher would appear less plump, would exhibit a more prominent eye-ring, and would not show the pale

line behind the eye like the bird in the picture. With gnatcatcher out as a possibility, let's consider warblers. While it is true that warblers have fine, thin bills, generally they are not as distinctly decurved as the mystery bird's bill. Also, virtually all warblers would show at least some distinctive marking, either on the head, face, or breast that would offer a clue as to its proper identity. Even a female Common Yellowthroat would exhibit some contrast between the clear yellow of its throat and upper breast with its brownish sides and pale lower breast and belly. Our bird shows none of these features, other than the presence of a very thin eye-ring, the aforementioned pale stripe behind its eye, and the suggestion of a few thin, dusky streaks on its cheeks.

Given that the bird is not a warbler, one has to conclude that the bird is a wren. Since both Carolina and Marsh wrens exhibit a bold white stripe over the eye, and the Sedge Wren has a distinctly finely striped crown, these species can be eliminated. The Winter Wren has decidedly darker underparts and more heavily barred flanks than the mystery wren, thus leaving us with the familiar House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) as the "wren of the month."

House Wrens are relatively common and widespread breeders and migrants throughout most of Massachusetts at lower elevations. Rarely, they attempt to over-winter near the coast. Eric Smith captured the fine portrait of the pictured House Wren in a suburb of Boston. 

Wayne R. Petersen

### ***The Chickadee* now available on CD-ROM**

*The Chickadee*, the annual journal of bird records for Worcester County, has been in existence since 1931. Recently, Richard Quimby of Worcester Polytechnic Institute scanned all pages of each volume of *The Chickadee* from 1931 until 2003 and put them on an easy-to-use CD-ROM. If you are at all interested in historical records of Massachusetts, this is an invaluable resource and tool, and it is just plain entertaining to read. To obtain a copy, write a \$5.00 check payable to the FORBUSH BIRD CLUB and send it to:

Francis McMenemy  
35 Laurier Street  
Worcester, MA 01603

Be sure to indicate it is for *The Chickadee* CD-ROM.

# AT A GLANCE

---



DAVID LARSON

Can you identify this bird?

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

---

## Western Mass Editor Wanted

*Bird Observer* is looking for an editor or co-editors to contribute and solicit articles and field notes from the western part of the state on a regular basis.

If you are interested in joining our editorial staff, please contact Carolyn Marsh at [cmarsh@jocama.com](mailto:cmarsh@jocama.com).

