



The puzzler on April's back cover was this bird of prey, perched at close range. Can you identify it to species?

Answer to Snap Judgment 8

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Because the birds of prey can be variable in plumage and confusing in general, we must begin by placing the bird in the proper group before looking for species-specific plumage details. This bird is apparently not a *Buteo*, being more slender and elongated than any of our species of that genus; nor is it a falcon, for the simple reason that all North American falcons are dark-eyed and the bird in the photograph clearly has a pale iris. Its plumage pattern does not fit any of the kites — the immature Mississippi Kite *Ictinia mississippiensis* is superficially similar, but it would not show the strong dark-and-light barring on the underside of the wing and tail; neither would the Marsh Hawk *Circus cyaneus* (which should also appear larger-headed and bulkier). By process of elimination, it must be one of our three species of *Accipiter*, and the streaked underparts indicate it is an immature.

No doubt at this point the reader will cry foul, because the photo has been cropped (deliberately, it would seem) so as not to show the tip of the tail . . . and the field guides suggest that tail shape is the most important field mark among the *Accipiters*. Will it still be possible to identify the bird?

I might as well admit at the outset that if the standard field guides are your only source of reference, you will not be able to identify the bird in the photograph. You may be further out of luck if you saw an article in *American Birds* (Volume 33, No. 3, pp. 236-240; May 1979) purportedly treating identification of this group: although much of the information in that article was accurate, many birders who read it were misled to believe that *Accipiters* are almost impossible to identify afield.

Actually, given a reasonably good look, practically all individual *Accipiters* may be identified with confidence. In the case of our Snap Judgment bird, I personally didn't see the bird in question so I have no way to judge its size (and the tail shape wasn't much help even before we cropped the photo), but I have no doubt that the bird is an immature Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*. Several visible characters support this identification.

The first and most obvious is the pattern of the underparts. There is streaking there, yes — certainly this is not the finely-barred breast pattern of the adult — but the streaking is broad, blurry, hardly contrasting against the underlying ground color. This is typical of the immature Sharp-shinned. Young Cooper's Hawks *A. cooperii*, by comparison, tend to be much more distinctly marked: their streaks are blackish-brown, narrow, sharply defined, standing out against a whitish ground color. This character cannot be used to identify all young Cooper's/Sharp-shinneds, as some may show an intermediate chest-pattern, but it may be applied confidently to extreme individuals such as the one in the photograph.

Another good character here is shape-oriented: the "long-legged" look of the pictured bird. Actually, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned differ little in proportionate leg-length (although the Goshawk *A. gentilis* does appear short-legged for its bulk), but the Sharp-shinned has very *thin* legs, contributing to the illusion of length. Yet another point to note is the facial expression. The eye seems large for the size of the head and is centrally located in the face, lending a faint aura of (dare I say it?) "cuteness" to an otherwise fierce little face; on the Cooper's, by contrast, the eye appears proportionately smaller and is set farther forward, creating a more efficiently predatory look.

This immature **Sharp-shinned Hawk** was photographed near Phoenix, Arizona, by Joe DiStefano.

Letters

Our review of R. T. Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds*, Fourth Edition (*Continental Birdlife* 2 (1): 22-27) drew a remarkable response: literally dozens of cards and letters arrived, all expressing more or less agreement with what we had to say. The longest and most interesting letter came from Dr. Kenneth C. Parkes, one of the world's leading authorities on bird taxonomy, hybridization, plumages, molts, distribution, etc. Dr. Parkes brought up so many points of direct potential interest to field observers that we are, with permission, reprinting most of his comments here.

You have done a good job in pointing out the anatomical distortions in many of Peterson's plates. One of his worst faults has always been the placement of eyes. George Sutton pointed out to me years ago that birds have very definite species-specific "facial expressions" that are based in large part on the shape and position (as well as color) of the eye. Get the eye wrong, and no matter how good the rest of the painting may be, it just won't look real to somebody who knows the bird in life. It is almost impossible to visualize a skull, orbits, and complete eyeballs under the surface of a typical Peterson bird. His uncertainty as to where the eye should go is illustrated in (among many others) the plate of *Corvus* on p. 207. The eyes of the Fish Crow and "American" Crow have their anterior edges over the gape, whereas the eye of the "Northern" Raven is almost an eye-diameter farther back in the head, a difference that does not exist in the