Female Golden-fronted Woodpecker or mutant female Red-bellied Woodpecker?

Tail patterns of these two species have been overlooked as important field characteristics in distinguishing between females whose abnormal coloration poses an identification problem.

Daniel T. Gerber

THE PURPOSE OF THIS NOTE IS TO discuss the possible misidentification of mutant, female Red-bellied Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes carolinus*) as female Golden-fronted Woodpeckers (*M. aurifrons*). Some of the field marks separating these two species are often confused in field guides and several cases of misidentification have been reported.

In 1975, Edscorn wrote a short note of interest about a photograph of a woodpecker originally identified as a Golden-fronted Woodpecker which was subsequently determined to be a Red-bellied Woodpecker exhibiting xanthochromism. In a later note, Stevenson (1975) also stated that the aforementioned bird was indeed "a xanthic Red-bellied Woodpecker." In a recent note, Hoffman (1984) stated with reference to Golden-fronted Woodpeckers that "most such reports in Florida and elsewhere in the East are of xanthic Red-bellied Woodpeckers . . ."

On March 25, 1977, a bird, first thought to be a Golden-fronted, was sighted by K. Wall on Folger Street, Clemson, S.C. Later, S. A. Gauthreaux, Jr., and H. E. LeGrand, Jr., were shown the bird and they identified it as a mutant, female Red-bellied Woodpecker.

On February 10, 1984, another female woodpecker was found in Clemson and initially identified as a female Golden-fronted Woodpecker (Gerber, this note). Gauthreaux mentioned the previous record of a mutant, female Red-bellied Woodpecker and suggested carefully scrutinizing the field marks, especially the tail markings. The bird had a yellow feather patch on its nape, yellow at the base of its culmen, and yellow feathers on its belly. These features are characteristic of female Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. The bird also had central, barred tail feathers, a characteristic feature of female Red-bellied Woodpeckers (Fig. 1). This bird was thus determined a female Red-bellied Woodpecker. On April 25, 1984, the mutant, female Red-bellied was collected and is now specimen #1915.

With the exception of the tail, the

Figure 1. *The birds shown in the photograph are (left to right) a female Golden-fronted Woodpecker, a xanthic, female Red-bellied Woodpecker, and a normal, female Red-bellied Woodpecker. Note the plumage colors on the base of the culmen, the nape, and the plumage pattern on the tails. Photo/S. A. Gauthreaux, Jr.*

plumage patterns of the female Red-bellied and Golden-fronted woodpeckers are similar. Obviously, the tail pattern is often overlooked as an important field mark. Ironically, one of the more authoritative bird guides on the market, *Master Guide to Birding,* incorrectly describes the Golden-fronted Woodpecker as having a black and white "barred" central tail pattern. The barred, central tail pattern is found *only* in the Red-bellied and not in the Golden-fronted. Several other field guides, while showing the barred, central tail feathers in their representations of the Red-bellied Woodpecker, fail to point these out as field marks. This oversight should be corrected in future guides to eliminate further misidentifications.

However, it is my opinion that this specimen does not exhibit xanthochromism. Only the areas of its body that would normally be red in a female Red-bellied are yellow, not the entire head and belly. In Volker (1964) as cited in Welty (1982), a deficient biochemical pathway was discovered as the cause of yellow plumage found on normally red plumaged birds. Whether or not a deficient pathway was the cause of the yellow plumage in the specimen here described is beyond the scope of this note.

This mutant, female Red-bellied was observed for several months, and during this time, several interesting observations were recorded. On March 3, 1984, a normal male Red-bellied Woodpecker chased her for several minutes. On March 24, it was discovered that she and a male were sharing a nest or roost hole. Owing to a storm, their hole was destroyed and they relocated and excavated another hole approximately 100 meters from their previous hole. In early April, 1984, the male attempted to copulate with her. This series of observations has interesting implications as to the importance of plumage coloration with respect to mate selection in Red-bellied Woodpeckers. In this case, the abnormal coloration of the female appeared to have little consequence on her ability to attract a mate.

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——*Department of Biological Sciences, Clemson University Clemson, SC 29631*

First record of Common Black-headed Gulls breeding in the United States

Photo/Robert C. Humphrey.

Since it was first recorded nesting in Iceland in 1911, this western European gull has steadily expanded its range across the North Atlantic into North America.