

Hard Shorebirds



Another, independently derived, analysis of this quiz appears on the ABA website. Check it out: aba.org/birding/v43n2p57w1.pdf

These photo quiz answers are wonderful! Here we have two great birders who have come up with different solutions to the photo quiz. And here's a confession of my own: I came up with yet another solution for the two birds in Quiz Photo B. All three of us—Cin-Ty Lee, Michael O'Brien, and I—did the quiz "blind." That is to say, Photo Quiz Editor

Cin-Ty Lee

Houston, Texas
ctlee@rice.edu

Michael O'Brien

Cape May, New Jersey
tsweet@comcast.net

Cameron Cox supplied us only with the date and location for each photo. And the photographer, Steve Howell, eventually disclosed to me that a panel of bird identification experts at a recent Western Field Ornithologists meeting got *all* of them wrong. This was a hard quiz. Nothing wrong with that.

For further analyses of the photos, check out the *Birding WebExtra* <aba.org/birding/v43n2p57w1.pdf> for this installment of the photo quiz answers. Before you do that, please take a look at Lee's and O'Brien's answers. It's highly instructive to compare the convergences and divergences in their solutions.

—Ted Floyd

Quiz Photo A

This is a tough one. First off, this is a dowitcher based on overall structure: bulky sandpiper, medium-length neck, thick longish bill. Second, this dowitcher is in juvenile plumage, judging from the crisp clean pale edges to the scapulars and covert feathers. But which dowitcher? There are lots of gestalt features that could be used on dowitchers, but in this case the legs and bill are partially submerged, and the bird is clearly feeding. That makes it difficult to assess bill length, leg length, and the shape of the supercilium and the loreal angle. The only structural feature left is the shape of the bird's rear, which shows a largely flat back, extending toward the tail

with little to no taper. This would suggest Short-billed because Long-billed has a more humped-back appearance. Consistent with the Short-billed theme, I note that the base of the bill seems thick and the culmen shows just a hint of curvature. Those marks are good for Short-billed.

I understand that one might seem skeptical about these gestalt features as they are so subtle, but first impressions are critical in the field. So now let's see if we can dig a little deeper by looking at "hard" field marks, such as plumage patterns. The first thing one has to recognize is that this bird is in juvenile plumage, based on the crisp pale edges to most of the feathers, giving a scaly look. Juvenile Short-billeds normally have heavily marked tertials and brighter, more rufous feather edges to the coverts. In this bird, the tertials are largely unmarked except for one that shows just a hint of barring. The covert feathers are mostly edged with white.

So far, all these plumage features seem more consistent with Long-billed. However, one cautionary note is that the white-edged covert feathers seem to represent fresh winter-plumaged feathers, suggesting that this bird is transitioning from juvenile to first basic plumage. This means that some of the textbook plumage features, like tertial markings, should be used with extreme caution. In cases like this, I turn to those feathers that are unequivocally juvenile or at least hold traces of juvenile plumage.

With this bird, we are fortunate that the scapulars are fresh juvenile ones. Here, I see dark feather centers with thin buffy margins. The clincher is that on the leading edge of each scapular, the buffy margin bleeds or hooks into the feather center; that's classic juvenile Short-billed. In juvenile Long-billed, the buff edges of the scapulars never hook into the feather center. Instead, the feather centers on Long-billed show black "anchors" similar to those seen on breeding-plumage Western Sandpipers. In fact, I find this scapular feature to be more reliable than the tertial markings.

Finally, I note that the sides and flanks are spotted and, from a distance, look paler than the breast,



Quiz Photo A. California; August. Photo by © Steve N. G. Howell.

which also points to Short-billed. On Long-billed, whether we're talking about juvenile or basic plumages, the sides are washed with gray and tend to be of the same shading as the breast—a good feature for picking out dowitchers in winter. Starting with “soft” field marks like gestalt and verifying with hard field marks like feather patterns, everything seems to be pointing toward **Short-billed Dowitcher**. —C-TL

Our first quiz bird is obviously a dowitcher—a football-shaped, probing shorebird with an evidently longish and stout bill, a strong eyebrow, and greenish legs. And judging from the relatively small, neatly arranged, pale-fringed feathering above, it is clearly a juvenile. Oh good, juves are the easy ones! This'll be a piece of cake! The textbook field mark to look for on juvenile dowitchers is internal markings on the tertails and greater coverts: Short-bills have obvious ones, Long-bills have virtually none. That would make this a Long-billed. But this is a photo quiz. It can't be that easy, right?

To be perfectly honest, when I first glanced at this photo, my immediate impression was Short-billed. The colorful back and breast-side contrasting with cool, almost bluish-gray wings is a look I associate with juvenile Short-billed. As I sit here trying to analyze what else about this bird says Short-billed to me, I am drawn particularly to the face. This bird has a very stout bill; a broad supraloral stripe; and a very dark crown, filled with broad black streaks. Typically, a juvenile Long-billed would show a thinner bill, a thinner supraloral stripe, and a broader-looking, decidedly *gray* crown. This bird most definitely has the face of a Short-billed. And, as mentioned earlier, it is also a bit on the colorful side for Long-billed, although by no means beyond the range of variation for that species.

That brings up an interesting point. Variation. Both of these

species are variable, and if you really think about that textbook field mark—the tertial and greater covert internal markings—the difference is really just a matter of degree. The patterns are not actually all that different. A lightly marked extreme Short-billed could probably overlap a heavily marked extreme Long-billed. And it is noteworthy that this photo was taken in California. Juveniles of the Pacific subspecies of Short-billed Dowitcher (*caurinus*) are particularly prone to lightly marked variants.

There are a few more points worth examining on this bird. The flanks are buffy with little black spots, just fine for Short-billed Dowitcher. Juvenile Long-billed has a flank pattern much like that of a nonbreeding adult, with broad smudgy gray barring and no black spots (except on the rear flanks and undertail coverts). As to the buffy background color of the flanks, that is okay for both species—but more typical of Short-billed. What little is visible of the tail looks better for Short-billed—lots of white with irregular black markings. And what about body shape? Although sometimes a very helpful feature *in the field* while birds are moving, this static photo did not capture a particularly distinctive body shape, one way or the other.

Bottom line: Unless the photographer wants to claim this as the first record of a hybrid dowitcher (complete with audio recordings), I'm going with **Short-billed Dowitcher**. —MO'B

Quiz Photo B

My first instinct on seeing this photo was that both birds are Whimbrels. The birds appear large (ruling out Little Curlew), although this impression is based largely on the bulkiness of these birds. The bills are long and decurved, but not as long as on Long-billed, Far Eastern, and Eurasian curlews. In addition, the base of the bill is proportionally thicker than that of Long-billed Curlew. The dark eye-line and dark split crown on both birds clearly indicates that these birds are some sort of Whimbrel. What is odd, however, is that these birds, particularly the one on the right, are much more brightly colored than the typical gray to brown coloration of the Whimbrels that I'm used to.

When he sent me these photos, Photo Quiz Editor Cameron Cox mentioned that this photo “with the curlews” might be tough. Maybe this is a trick photo of Bristle-thighed Curlews, which have been known to occur along the middle to northern Pacific coast of North America during spring migration. However, having just spent some time studying Bristle-thighs in Hawaii, I still believe these birds to be Whimbrels. Bristle-thighs' bills seem thinner at the base and more refined



Quiz Photo B. California, May. Photo by © Steve N. G. Howell.

than those of Whimbrels. Structurally, then, these birds don't fit Bristle-thighed.

Of course, structure and gestalt are somewhat subjective, so a closer look at plumage patterns seems worthwhile. The first thing I note is that the sides and flanks are heavily barred, consistent with Whimbrel but not with Bristle-thighed, whose sides are largely unmarked. Another point is that the pale feather edges of the scapulars look indented by the black feather centers, again consistent with Whimbrel. In Bristle-thighed, the pale feather edges are more uniform, giving a scalier and more buffy-backed appearance from a distance. Also, the barring on the tertials is striped, consistent with Whimbrel. In Bristle-thighed, the tertials have a more saw-tooth pattern. Finally, I don't see any obvious bristles.

So I'll throw my hat into the **Whimbrel** camp. I'm not concerned by the bright coloration or extensive paleness of the base of the bill; these Whimbrels appear to be in fresh breeding plumage. Finally, with the dark tones, I assume these are American Whimbrels, not the Eurasian subspecies, which is whiter below and of course would have a white wedge on the back if we could see these birds in flight. That being said, the rufous tones on the right bird still bothers me. Maybe the right bird is a hybrid with Long-billed Curlew, but extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, so there's no point entertaining this thought with just one picture. —C-TL

Okay, this will be much easier. Two mottled brown shorebirds with long decurved bills and bold head stripes. Whimbrels! Next... Oh, wait. Why does that one on the right look so buffy? Not only that, but it has huge, contrasting buff spots on the tertials, greater coverts, and scapulars, and a rich buffy tail with bold black bars. These are all features more con-

sistent with Bristle-thighed Curlew than Whimbrel. Could this be a Bristle-thighed? Although not always obvious, the "bristles" for which that species was named are not visible here, and probably should be in this photo. One big problem for Bristle-thighed Curlew is the heavily marked flanks and undertail coverts. Any markings in this area on Bristle-thighed should be few, large, and restricted to the mid and upper flanks. The head pattern seems a little on the bold side for Bristle-thighed, which usually has weaker head stripes filled with tiny buff streaks. It looks perfect for Whimbrel,

though. The neck also looks just right for Whimbrel. Bristle-thighed tends to have slightly coarser neck streaking.

Hm. I'm starting to think about that last quiz bird, and the V word. Variation, that is. Like dowitchers, both Whimbrel and Bristle-thighed Curlew are variable. In this case, the question is: Which unusual features are more "acceptable"? The problems for Whimbrel are mostly a matter of degree, an adjustment of contrast and color—the spots are bigger and more contrasting than they should be, and the bird is overall buffier than it should be. The problems for Bristle-thighed Curlew are a little harder to explain, particularly the pattern of the flanks and undertail coverts, plus the lack of bristles. If I had to guess, which I suppose is exactly what I'm assigned to do here, I would say this is **most likely a Whimbrel**, although a hybrid (Whimbrel × Bristle-thighed Curlew) seems like a reasonable possibility, too. It would be nice to see the rump pattern and to hear the bird's call. —MO'B

Quiz Photo C

This is a *Pluvialis* plover. It is too slender, small billed, and small headed to be Black-bellied. Structurally, it also does not fit the dumpy, stubby-billed, short-reared appearance of European Golden-Plover. Of course, given that this bird was photographed in California, European Golden-Plover can be ruled out because I'm sure I would have heard about a sighting of that species! So basically, we're down to the tough pair of Pacific and American golden-plovers.

What makes it tough is that this bird is in juvenile plumage based on the crisp and broad feather edges, so there really are not a lot of good distinguishing field marks in terms of feather

pattern, at least not that I'm aware of. I note that the bird has a lot of golden tones on the mantle, tertials, and some of the scapulars, which might at first hint at Pacific, but I have seen juvenile Americans equally bright. In cases like this, we have no choice but to resort to structural field marks.

Overall, this bird looks to me to have a small, rounded head, almost like a dove. It has a thin, dainty bill and a relatively thin neck situated on a slender body. The slenderness of this bird is further accentuated by the long primary extension, which gives the bird a slight taper at its rear. These features are consistent with American Golden-Plover. Pacific has a shorter primary extension, which gives it a more ovoid body shape rather than the tear-drop body shape of American. Birds with long primary extensions often show crossing wingtips, much like this bird. In my experience, Americans often show the wingtips crossing, whereas Pacifics do not, but I admit I have never attempted to test this empirically—and one always has to be careful with primary extension on juvenile birds, as juveniles tend to have longer wings than adults.

The last feature I note is the distinct white supercilium. Although both golden-plovers show a white supercilium, my experience is that in American the white supercilium extends almost all the way to the back of the head, as on this bird, whereas on Pacific it ends just behind the eye, and becomes buff or yellow beyond that point. This gives American a slightly different facial pattern than Pacific. My impression is that this is an **American Golden-Plover**. Recognizing all the caveats of identifying shorebirds from one photo alone, this is a case in which more photos of the bird would certainly be useful. —C-TL

Why does this juvenile Pacific Golden-Plover have such a long primary projection? That's the question that popped into my head when I first looked at this photo. Okay, maybe we should back up. The bird's general proportions, bill shape, and gold-spangled plumage tell us it is one of the golden-plovers. And right off the bat, you can forget about European Golden-Plover, which is a fat thing with a teeny-weeny bill and teeny-weeny gold spots above. Besides, this was photographed in California. To cheat a little, I think I would have heard if a European Golden-Plover had been seen in California! So Pacific and American are the only species to worry about. Next, it's a juvenile, based on the crisply patterned wing coverts and scapulars, the neatly streaked crown, and the neatly patterned breast.

Ignoring primary projection for the moment, let's look at all the characters that support my impression of Pacific. For starters, it's a pretty bright bird with a yellow wash on the face and breast—where American lacks yellow. It has a large blocky



Quiz Photo C. California, September. Photo by © Steve N. G. Howell.

head, heavy bill, and longish legs, all better for Pacific. The bill is pale based, a common trait on Pacific but unusual on American. The gold spots above are very large, and the dark markings on the crown and breast are coarse and bold. The eyebrow is rather weak and brightest above the eye, not behind the eye as is usually the case on American. It has a few distinctly brighter gold spots above. These are fresh “formative” (first-winter) feathers that are often very bright like this on Pacific, but quite drab grayish-brown on American. Also, in both species, these new feathers do not usually appear until the wintering grounds are reached—wintering grounds that include California for Pacific but not (or at best, rarely) for American. The evidence is overwhelming. It's a card-carrying Pacific. Well, except for one card...

Back to the primary projection thing. American Golden-Plovers are supposed to show four primaries past the tertials and Pacifics only three. While this may be true on average, I've never been a huge fan of that field mark. It's variable (the V word again!), and can look completely different if just one feather (a primary or tertial) is missing or not fully grown. With that in mind, let's take a close look at our quiz bird's primaries, tertials, and tail. The positions of primaries relative to tail look fine for Pacific. The problem here is that the tertials are short—about the same length as the longest greater covert. Normal, fully grown tertials should be a good 50% longer than that, which would put them right where they “should” be for a Pacific Golden-Plover. Why are they so short? I don't know. Maybe they are still growing, or perhaps their growth was interrupted for some reason and they never reached normal length. Regardless, the bird is a **Pacific Golden-Plover**. —MO'B