

Name That Bird (09/10.07.2021)

Calling all MVAS and friends of MVAS photographers! We need more bird photos for NTB!

So, if you have photos of birds and you're not sure what they are, send them along to mpnltn@gmail.com with **Name That Bird** in the subject line. Please also include where and when you took the photo and any other relevant info about the photo you care to share.

Our panel of experienced birders will deliberate and then give you their best guesses as to what birds are captured in your photos.

Spoiler Alert: The identifications for the birds in the following photos are provided in the accompanying text. If you want to identify them yourself, you will need to do so before you read the text.

Sara Walker sent the first two photos we're using for this installment of NTB. Thanks to her for so generously sharing her photos with us!



Photo 1

The first one is of a Meadowlark, as most of you will know already. Sara took this photo during the final week of June this year at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park and wondered which one it is. An Eastern Meadowlark—*Sturnella magna*—or its cousin, *Sturnella neglecta*, the Western Meadowlark?

If you hear Meadowlarks, you can easily tell which species they are, but it takes more skill to identify them visually in the field. When you have a photo to study, as we do here, it's easier. Here are the fieldmarks our panelists used to identify this bird:

- A) A dark auricular (cheek) patch;
- B) Yellow rather than whitish malar (or mustache) stripe;
- C) White—not buffy—flanks;

D) Spots instead of streaks on the flanks.

Identification: All three panelists agreed that they would identify this as a Western Meadowlark



Photo 2

This photo was taken on 1 July this year in Sara's back yard, and again the panelists were unanimous in their agreement as to the species.

Panelist 1 offered no thoughts as to sex or age of the bird. Panelist 2 said it was an adult female. Panelist 3 agreed with him at first, but then took a closer look at the face and bill.

He pointed out that the bill is black, and females of this species have pale yellowish/buffy bills. Males have black throats and upper breasts, which both appear faint grey at best on the bird in this photo, but two other male plumage characteristics are more pronounced. First, there is the definite beginning of a black stripe going through the eye to the beak. Second, there is a bright white spot directly behind the eye. Based on these observations, panelist 3 suggested that this was a male that had hatched this year and was molting into adult plumage.

Identification: If, as our panelists did, you identified this as a House Sparrow, you are correct.



Photo 3

Susan Keller took this photo on 29 September 2020 at Aguirre Spring Recreation Area and when she sent it to me, she wrote that she hadn't

been able to figure out what it was. Keller submitted it for our first NTB website installment, but none of the panelists were comfortable making an identification, so we held it over for this one.

Panelist 1 said he just plain didn't feel confident enough to offer a suggestion. Panelist 2 said two long shots that had occurred to him were 1) Say's Phoebe, and 2) Townsend's Solitaire. Neither one was satisfactory though. The only real similarity—albeit superficial—to a Say's Phoebe is the coloration. Plus, Say's doesn't have such a noticeable eyering, secondary and tertiary feather edging or a domed head. This bird belongs to the same family as Townsend's Solitaire (hint, hint) but the similarity is again only superficial: the prominent eyering. This bird is just too chunky for a Solitaire and the tail is too short. Solitaires have an elongated tubular shape and the first thing you notice about their tails is how long they are. Panelist 3 was the closest of all three in his suggestion for identity, but he was still tentative and if I put his idea here it would give the whole thing away. There is a certain look to the bird that three panelists picked up on, though. See if you can notice it.

Disregard the coloration. What group of birds do the general size, shape, and proportions plus the eyeing suggest to you? Keep this in mind and when the identity is revealed, see if you had the same thoughts as the panelists.

This photo is a good example of how plumage color can be unreliable when it comes to identifying a bird. Individuals in the field can be lighter or darker than the illustrations in the field guide. Plus the angle and quality of light at different times of day can highlight fieldmarks that don't usually stand out.

Identification: Two paragraphs above I alluded to a group of birds that the general shape, size, proportions and eyering of this one suggested. Did you think of Thrushes and/or Bluebirds when you read that? If you did, you were on the same track as the panelists.

Panelist 1 wrote that the bird looked "bluebirdish" but the that feather edging, facial pattern and general dark color were wrong. When panelist 2 first saw the photo, he says what immediately came to mind was some kind of Thrush, and more specifically a female Mountain Bluebird, but the bird in the photo appeared to be too dark. Also, the facial pattern was wrong; the females of all three species have plain faces. Upon consulting various field guides, he thought possibly it was a female Western Bluebird. Panelist 3 didn't change his opinion from the first time and wrote he guessed this was a female Mountain Bluebird.

I sent off the picture to our resident (in cyberspace at least) experts to get their opinions. Nancy Stotz wrote that, unless the photographer sent in a photo of an exotic bird from foreign parts, she thought it was “. . . some kind of bluebird . . .”. Dave Griffin wrote that he was “. . .happy calling it a female Western Bluebird.”

So, what is it? Panelists and experts all agree that it's “. . .some kind of bluebird” as Nancy Stotz wrote. She and Panelist 1 didn't take the ID any further than that. Dave Griffin called it a female Western Bluebird, while Panelists 2 and 3 opted for a female Mountain Bluebird.

Just to clarify (or possibly confuse) the issued some more. I am going to take Panelist 1's offer to submit this to the Facebook bird ID group to stew what they say. I will let you know the results.

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