
PETE'S TIPS: Of Bananas and Kumquats and Brown vs. Brown

BY PETE DUNNE

Less-experienced birders are often fixated on details, often fine details, of plumage to make an identification, even when the size and shape of a bird are more apparent and more helpful. Certainly there are times when plumage is a bird's most obvious and distinguishing trait (e.g., the stand-out tricolored pattern of an adult Red-headed Woodpecker), but often, especially at a distance, shape is easier to discern.

Take Barn and Cliff Swallows, two species that share some basic plumage characteristics but could hardly be more dissimilar in shape. Barn Swallows are lithe and slender overall, with slim wings and a long, tined tail. Cliff Swallows are compact, roundly contoured, broad-winged, blunt-tailed birds. They also differ in flight style, with Barn Swallows more reckless and agile, while Cliff Swallows are given to protracted glides (like the also broadly proportioned Purple Martin).

But when I was a beginning birder, I was told to look for a pale forehead and a buffy rump to distinguish Cliff from Barn.

Chances are that your skills have grown beyond this rudimentary comparison (of *course*, you are thinking, Barn Swallows and Cliff Swallows are as different as bananas and kumquats). But has it occurred to you that the shapes of the two "brown-backed" swallows are almost as distinctive as those of Barn and Cliff?

They are?

Yes, they are. The shape of Bank Swallow is akin to Barn, lithe and long with slender wings and a long, tapered

body/tail that even appears forked/notched (and might recall a young Barn Swallow). Northern Rough-winged is more compact, blunter-tailed, and roundly contoured (much like Cliff). In flight, Bank is also like Barn, reckless, fast, with slicing wing beats. Northern Rough-winged is comparatively sluggish, with more fluttery wingbeats.

Of course, plumage should not be overlooked. Northern Rough-winged is uniformly dull brown above and dingy white below, and appears overall somewhat shabby or drab—a working-class swallow. Bank Swallow is crisp, trim, and contrasting; it shows a pale, somewhat lustrous lower back, darker wings, and bright white underparts—a gentrified brown-backed swallow, the kind of swallow you wouldn't mind your son or daughter going out with.

Why is it you've never noticed the structural and overall plumage differences before? Because traditionally, birders have been conditioned to look at one or more defining traits, a detail, not at the bird—the dark band on the breast of Bank Swallow vs. the dusky throat on Northern Rough-winged. These field marks work. But they are difficult to see on birds heading dead away, which is, at least in my experience, a trick often employed by birds.

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Yesterday's News

It's easy to forget sometimes what birding was like in those not-so-long-ago days before the internet and cell phones:

"On April 28 [1969] several birders from Illinois found what they reported to be Brown Jays *Psilorhinus morio* near a picnic area below Falcon Dam on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande. They were not reported until recently so no verification was made at the time. This is a prime example of the reasons why lists and individuals to contact should be in the hands of all serious birders. Attempts are now being made to verify the presence of these Mexican wanderers and if they would be found it would represent not only the first occurrence of the species in the A.O.U. area, but the first record outside Mexico." (*Birding* Vol. 1, no. 3)

An ingenious solution was inspired by a venerable birding institution, though:

"I think Mass. Audubon's 'Voice of Audubon' is the greatest thing since sliced bread. How about having, say, six numbers like that, each serving a different region of the

country? Thus, one could get an up-to-date report on any region." (*Birding* Vol. 1, no. 6)

Of course, the question of just what constitutes a "region" was a thorny one early on:

"Our first Canadian member, Daniel Brunton of Killbear Provincial Park, Ontario, is a welcome addition to our association.... It seems that we unintentionally trod on forbidden areas of international protocol by lumping all of Canada into one unit thereby making it equivalent to one 'state'. Mr Brunton puts it very cogently by stating, 'One cannot rationally suppose an area like Canada, with 10 provinces of great size, to simply compose one birding unit.... If nothing else my "Canuck" pride is injured by relegation to "statehood." The A.B.A. will make little headway in Canada under such a cumbersome regulation.' (*Birding* Vol. 1, no. 4)

We've seen the light.