

Soft Parts: Leg Color in Passerines

Tony Leukering

Most birders pay, perhaps, too much attention to plumage color and pattern when looking at birds. What separates the highly skilled birders from the rest of us is their keen knowledge of all the facets of a bird's behavior and appearance. Soft-parts coloration is just one of those facets, but it is one that I've paid more and more attention to over the years, as I've found it very useful in bird identification.

If you look at the back cover of this issue, what feature would you say this disparate set of passerines shares? Particularly alert readers may have arrived at the correct answer even without looking at the title of this essay. The images on the back cover include a thrush, a pipit, two warblers and a sparrow. Bill shapes differ, size differs, primary projection differs and plumage color and pattern certainly differ! The only consistent feature (other than the basic fact that each bird has two wings, two legs, a tail, etc.) is that they all have pink legs. This is somewhat odd because pink legs is a rare feature in ABA-area bird species. The feature is quite rare in non-passerines (with the notable exception of large, white-headed gulls) and is not all that common in passerines.

Among passerines, the feature is most common among the emberizid sparrows (family Emberizidae), not to be confused with the original passerid sparrows (Passeridae, such as House Sparrow). In fact, there may well be more pink-legged ABA-area emberizids than all other pink-legged ABA-area species combined, with some 34 of 44 New World-breeding emberizid species sporting pink or pinkish legs (Sibley 2014).

So, how is it that pink legs are so useful as an identification character if nearly all sparrows sport pink legs and nearly nothing else does? And particularly given that *Catharus* thrushes (e.g. Hermit Thrush, Fig. 1), Ovenbirds (Fig. 2) and waterthrushes, which are of-

"Soft parts" is the term given to the parts of a bird not covered by feathers, although some of these parts are not actually "soft." For most species, the list of soft parts is limited to the bill, eyes and legs, but a sizable minority have additional features such as orbital rings or bare facial skin, even largely un-feathered heads. Many of us already use these features, at least half-heartedly, in bird identification. There are even species named for soft parts, such as Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-eyed Vireo and Greater Yellowlegs. We are thus aware of the importance of the colors of these particular soft parts, at least on certain species.

ten mistaken for sparrows and vice-versa, also sport pink legs? I'm glad you asked! In Colorado, juvenile Horned Larks are frequently misidentified as Sprague's Pipits (Leukering 2009). However, a quick look at the bird's legs would point out that mistake, since Sprague's Pipits (Fig. 3.) have pink legs, while Horned Larks have black legs. Indeed, the legs of most American Pipits are either black or dark, although some have pinkish legs. Of course, if the bird is posing for you nicely in the open in Colorado, almost by definition it is not a Sprague's Pipit!

Orange-crowned, Nashville and MacGillivray's Warblers are another source of confusion for many birders. I even know of bird banders that have misidentified juvenile/immature Orange-crowned Warblers as MacGillivray's Warblers. Yet only MacGillivray's Warbler (Fig. 4) has pink legs, Orange-crowned and Nashville have black legs. Of course leg color won't help you differentiate MacGillivray's Warbler from Mourning Warbler or Common Yellowthroat as all three have pink legs!

Our final example involves towhees. I believe that Canyon Towhee (Fig. 5) is often misidentified as Green-tailed Towhee in southeastern Colorado during winter. Here again, if you know that Green-tailed Towhees have black legs, then it's rather straight forward to separate these from the pink-legged Canyon Towhee.

Thus a detailed knowledge of leg color is an important component of high-level field-identification skills. So get out your field guide and note all the passerines with pink legs. If you look carefully you may notice a strikingly obvious behavioral feature that seems highly correlated with pink legs. Go ahead, I'll wait!

Well, did you figure it out? Pink-legged passerines, nearly to a species, spend much of their time on or near the ground. The mechanics of this correlation, that is, the reason or reasons behind it, are unknown to me and, it seems, unknown to science in general. At least none of the birders/ornithologists that I've asked have been able to provide an answer, nor have I been able to find an answer in the ornithological literature. Still, even if we don't know if, or what, links these pink-legged species, we can use the presence of pink legs to aid us in field identification.

LITERATURE CITED

- Leukering, Tony 2009. Juvenile Horned Lark. *Colorado Birds* 43:152-154.
Sibley, David Allen 2014. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, Second ed. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

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Fig. 1. Hermit Thrush, Higbees Beach S. W. A., Cape May Co., NJ, 30 October 2010. Photo by Tony Leukering



Fig. 2. Ovenbird, Key Largo Hammocks, Monroe County, FL, 24 April 2007. Photo by Christopher L.Wood



Fig. 3. Sprague's Pipit, Eddy County, NM, 24 November 2007. Photo by Jerry Oldenettel



Fig. 4. Male MacGillivray's Warbler, Piceance Basin, CO, 1 July 2009 . Photo by Dona Hilkey

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Fig. 5. Canyon Towhee, Pueblo West, Pueblo Co., CO, 25 November 2011. Photo by Loch Kilpatrick