

Winter Records of Swainson's Thrush in Ontario

by
Martin K. McNicholl

On 3 March 1984, I was birding in High Park, Toronto, York R.M. when I was astonished to see a *Catharus* thrush flit back and forth into and out of some cedar (or similar) trees in a gully below me. Although I was aware of recent reports of Hermit Thrushes (*C. guttatus*) in the Toronto area (Parker 1984), my initial impression, based on the soft "whit" call very familiar to me from Vancouver Island and elsewhere and on a "wide-eyed" appearance, was of a Swainson's Thrush (*C. ustulatus*).

Although all the *Catharus* thrushes utter similar calls, they are sufficiently distinct that had I been in Alberta or British Columbia during the breeding season, I would have been reasonably certain of the species from this call alone. However, I was less certain on hearing it from such an out-of-season bird, especially considering the possibility that eastern races or populations may sound slightly different from western birds. I doubted this identification further when the thrush flicked its tail up and down slowly three or four times, a behaviour more frequently

exhibited by Hermit Thrushes, but also occasionally shown by Swainson's (Bent 1949; pers. obs. in Winnipeg and on Vancouver Island), and by Gray-cheeked (*C. minimus*) (A. Wormington, pers. comm. 1985). The thrush then flew into open sunlight, where I could clearly see the continuous olive-brown back and tail, with no hint of rusty from any angle, ruling out Hermit. The buffy throat, upper breast, cheek, lores, and especially wide eye ring, and the large breast spots ruled out both Gray-cheeked and Veery (*C. fuscescens*). The bird remained for the next 10 minutes (1540-1550h), while I studied it from above, below, and at eye level through 8x40 binoculars at times as close as three or four metres.

The normal winter range of Swainson's Thrush is in Central and South America (Bent 1949; A. O. U. 1983), with casual records to the Texas Gulf Coast (A. O. U. 1983). Parker (1983) indicated there were no March records for Toronto, only one in April, one December record, and three in November. James *et al.* (1976) indicated a normal

Martin K. McNicholl, Long Point Bird Observatory, P.O. Box 160, Port Rowan, Ontario N0E 1M0

occurrence period in Ontario from 17 April to 23 October, with extreme dates of 19 March and 11 November.

Christmas bird count data indicate a few early winter records for Ontario, most unsubstantiated, but none in Toronto. These include one not questioned by the compiler during the count period at London, Middlesex Co. in 1967 (Jarmain 1968), a 1976 record at Hamilton, Hamilton-Wentworth R.M. (North 1977a), a 1980 record at Blenheim, Kent Co. (Burk 1981)—these latter two praised by the Editor for “excellent details”—and 1978 and 1980 records at St. Thomas, Elgin Co. (Auckland 1979, 1981), considered “inconclusive.” A thrush at Deep River, Renfrew Co. on the 1971 count (Walker 1972) was believed to be a Swainson’s, but not claimed as a positive identification. Christmas bird count records are frequently inadequately documented, and most of these reports cannot be considered positive. Further details of the Hamilton record were published by North (1977 b, c), who reported that the bird was observed west of Willow Point by Alan Wormington and others on 2, 11 and 26 December. Wormington (pers. comm. 1985) notes that the description is on file with Dennis Rupert, Ontario CBC Editor.

The only winter records for Toronto of which I am aware are also from December: one was observed at Grenadier Pond in High Park by Bob Bateman and Don Smith on 5 December 1954 (Baillie 1955); and another was observed on 1 December 1981 by

Chip and Linda Weseloh (Weir 1982).

Another December record for Ontario occurred when David Agro and David Shepherd caught a hatch-year probable male in a ground trap with two American Tree Sparrows (*Spizella arborea*) about 1400h on 20 December 1984 at the Old Cut cottage station of the Long Point Bird Observatory, Haldimand-Norfolk R.M. Good details are on file at observatory headquarters.

The Point Pelee, Essex Co. checklist indicates two December records there (Wormington 1981), but this is apparently based on one record of a bird seen by Wormington and others from 5-8 December 1979 (A. Wormington, pers. comm. 1985). R.D. McRae (pers. comm. 1985) prepared a specimen of a Swainson’s Thrush that was observed to fly into a window at Kingsville, Essex Co. on 2 December 1976. The bird was brought to Point Pelee National Park by Norm Rattan, where McRae determined it was a hatch-year bird by the amount of skull ossification (T. Hince, pers. comm.). It is now in the National Museum of Canada, as yet uncatalogued, but with accession number 1983-86.

There are two December records for Ottawa—Carleton R.M., a bird seen by Bruce M. DiLabio at Almonte on 13 December 1984 and another observed three days later at Rockcliffe Village by Ray Holland and V. Bernard Ladouceur (Ladouceur and DiLabio 1984).

December records of

Swainson's and related thrushes (McRae 1984; Sandilands and Dance 1984) may represent birds that were injured or sick during their normal southward migration or, in some cases, birds responding to unseasonably mild weather, but in any case can be considered as extremely late migrants. The 1984 record at Long Point was of a bird with plenty of fat and healthy appearance that flew strongly on release (D. Shepherd, pers. comm. 1984) after banding (band number 1321-67708), but McRae's (1984) 1981 record of a Gray-cheeked Thrush at Point Pelee involved a bird that evidently was starving. Few such birds are likely to survive the entire winter.

March thrush records are far fewer, although there are many winter records of Hermits beyond December. James *et al.* (1976) have classed it as a rare winter resident. The 19 March date listed for Swainson's Thrush by James *et al.* (1976) for Ontario and for the "south-eastern Michigan/south-western Ontario" area by Kelley (1978) presumably is based on the 1972 observation at Point Pelee by F. Hirschmann and D.C. Sadler (Goodwin 1972) for which details are lacking. Kelley (1983) reports one additional record (10 March 1977) for her study area with no details. The bird that I observed in High Park appeared healthy and flew well in spite of -2° C weather.

Acknowledgements

The comments of Bill Crins, Heather Lang-Runtz, Doug McRae, and Alan Wormington helped improve the manuscript. The efforts of Michel Gosselin and

Don Wilkes in attempting to locate the Kingsville specimen and of Tom Hince in finally tracking it down are much appreciated.

Literature Cited

- American Ornithologists' Union.* 1983. Check-list of North American Birds. 6th ed. Lawrence, Kansas.
- Auckland, L.* 1979. The seventy-ninth Audubon Christmas bird count. 83. St. Thomas, Ont. *Amer. Birds.* 33:369.
- Auckland, L.* 1981. The eighty-first Audubon Christmas bird count. 83. St. Thomas, Ont. *Amer. Birds.* 35:399.
- Baillie, J.L.* 1955. Winter season December 1, 1954—March 31, 1955. Ontario-western New York region. *Audubon Field Notes* 9:254-256.
- Bent, A.C.* 1949. Life histories of North American thrushes, kinglets, and their allies, U.S. *Natl. Mus. Bull.* 196 (reprinted 1964, Dover Publications Inc., New York).
- Burk, K.J.* 1981. The eighty-first Audubon Christmas bird count. 48. Blenheim, Ont. *Amer. Birds* 35:391.
- Goodwin, C.E.* 1972. The winter season December 1, 1971—March 31, 1972. Ontario. *Amer. Birds* 26:597-601.
- James, R.D., P.L. McLaren, and J.C. Barlow.* 1976. Annotated checklist of the birds of Ontario. *Royal Ont. Mus. Life Sci. Misc. Publ.*, Toronto.
- Jarmain, W.* 1968. Sixty-eighth Christmas bird count. 35. London, Ont. *Audubon Field Notes* 22:102.

Kelley, A.H. 1978. Birds of southeastern Michigan and southwestern Ontario. Cranbrook Inst. Science, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

Kelley, A.H. 1983. Birds of s.e. Michigan and s.w. Ontario. Notes on the years 1975-1981. Jack-Pine Warbler 61:3-12.

Ladouceur, V.B. and B.M. DiLabio, 1984. Sightings. The Shrike 9(6): 3-10.

McRae, R.D. 1984. A winter record of the Gray-cheeked Thrush in Ontario. Ont. Birds 2:86-87.

North, G. 1977a. The seventy-seventh Audubon Christmas bird count. 50. Hamilton, Ont. Amer. Birds 31:441-442.

North, G.W. 1977b. Noteworthy bird records. Wood Duck 30:88-89.

North, G.W. 1977c. Noteworthy bird records. Wood Duck

30:104-105.

Parker, B.D. 1983. Toronto region bird chart. Toronto Field Nat., Toronto.

Parker, B.D. 1984. Toronto region bird records. December 1983. Toronto Field Nat. 362:10.

Sandilands, A.P. and K.W. Dance. 1984. A winter record of a Veery in Ontario. Ont. Birds 2:84-86.

Walker, B. 1972. Seventy-second Christmas bird count. 40. Deep River, Ont. Amer. Birds 26:159.

Weir, R.D. 1982. The winter season. December 1, 1981—February 28, 1982. Ontario region. Amer. Birds 36:289-291.

Wormington, A. 1981. Point Pelee National Park and vicinity. Seasonal status of birds. 2nd ed. Parks Canada.

New Titles

Toronto Region Bird Report: 1984. 1985. *B.D. Parker, H. Currie, D.V. Weseloh, G. Coady, A. Jaramillo and K. Konze* (Eds.) Toronto Ornithological Club. Available for \$5.00 from Bruce D. Parker, 109 Valleywoods Rd., TH 66, Don Mills, Ontario M3A 2R8.

This is the first of what the editors hope will be annual reports on the birdlife of this heavily birded region. The purpose of the report is to summarize the records of occurrence and abundance of all birds within the 50 km circle centred on the Royal Ontario Museum in downtown Toronto. This area encompasses the Lake Ontario shoreline from east

Burlington to Whitby, and inland to Georgetown and Newmarket. The period covered by the report is not the 1984 calendar year, but rather, covers the period from 1 December 1983 to 30 November 1984, to coincide with the traditional birding seasons. Brief seasonal summaries are provided, and these are followed by the 266 species' treatments.

W.J.C.