

Photo Quiz

by

Ron Pittaway



The quiz bird is a **Bicknell's Thrush**! It is clearly a thrush in the genus *Catharus*, one of either Veery, Swainson's, Hermit, Gray-cheeked or Bicknell's. The extensive and heavy spotting on the breast should eliminate even the *salicicola* subspecies of the Veery. Swainson's has dark lores and usually a bold eyering; a broad supraloral stripe (not always present) connects to the eyering. Hermit Thrushes usually have well-defined, narrow eyerings, and the bicolored bill is less contrasting. Our bird is either a Gray-cheeked or a Bicknell's Thrush. Both have inconspicuous eyerings, or incomplete

eyerings (with whitish brackets slightly over and behind the eyes) like the quiz bird. We can't be sure which species it is in a black-and-white photograph, but the more extensive pale base of the lower mandible suggests Bicknell's. Fortunately, I have in front of me colour slides showing side, front and back views of this bird. The inner two thirds of the lower mandible is a fairly bright pale yellow, indicating Bicknell's. The dorsal view shows a warm, back and a hint of chestnut on the tail. In the Gray-cheeked (subspecies *aliciae*), the back and tail are more grayish olive. The side view shows rufous edges to the primaries

and outer secondaries, another good indicator of Bicknell's. This banded Bicknell's Thrush was photographed by Doug McRae on 17 May 1980 at Prince Edward Point near Kingston. After handling many thrushes that day, Doug reported that it was small in the hand and measurements supported its identification as a Bicknell's Thrush. Measurements are on file with the Kingston Field Naturalists' Club. Doug has agreed to have his photographs reviewed by the OBRC and the KFN will be asked for the measurements. The OBRC will be reviewing specimen and photograph records of Bicknell's Thrush. A record must be accepted before it can be added officially to the Ontario checklist. The status of Bicknell's Thrush in Ontario is still unknown. In summer, it is found in Quebec north of Ottawa and Pembroke. As I mentioned in *OFO NEWS* 14(2):1 and 8, it is "probably a rare but regular spring and fall migrant in Eastern Ontario." There is a remote chance that it may breed in Ontario. A search of suitable habitat in northeastern Ontario is needed.

Diagnostic field marks of non-singing Bicknell's are being tested and more identification articles are expected in birding journals. Currently, the best article on the identification of Bicknell's Thrush is by Ian McLaren in the October 1995 *Birding* 27(5): 358-366. Concern has been expressed about the field identification of Bicknell's; for example, David Agro's letter in the December 1994 *Ontario Birds* 12 (3): 85 and P. William Smith in the August 1996 *Birding* 28 (4): 275-276. But note the remarks of Ned Brinkley (*Birdchat*, 26 February 1996); "there are a few people currently concerned about

variation in plumage of *minimus* and *aliciae* Gray-cheeks, but it is interesting (if one hears the preliminary reports correctly) that most of the people working against a notion of identifiable Bicknell's are working with museum skins. I find in spring migration that I am able to detect Bicknell's by its distinctive song, and that (so far) 100% of Bicknell's detected first by ear have conformed to Henri Ouellet's description of Bicknell's plumage. The same, so far, has been true of non-Bicknell's Gray-cheeks." Fortunately, breeding Bicknell's are easily identified by a combination of range, song, calls, habitat and field marks.

Finding Bicknell's Thrush:

Bicknell's Thrush is the most elusive and sought after of the new species recently announced by the American Ornithologists' Union (*Auk* 112 (3): 819-830), based on the studies of Henri Ouellet (*Ontario Birds* 11(2): 41-45; *Wilson Bulletin* 105(4): 545-572). In early July 1996, Jean Iron and I searched for Bicknell's in Quebec. We heard but did not see them! However, we learned a few lessons about finding (and seeing) them which should be of interest to birders planning to look for them in 1997. On 7 and 8 July, we checked Mont Sir Wilfrid (near Mont Laurier) in the Laurentians north of Ottawa. After the pavement ends, the last 11 km are along a service road to three communication towers at the summit, elevation 806 metres (2645 feet). Jean's Toyota barely made it up the narrow, steep and bumpy road to the top. Getting there is the easy part; finding Bicknell's Thrush is the hard part. We experienced wind, rain, and fog. Having arrived at the summit in late afternoon, we waited

over four hours until dusk before the thrushes started calling and singing. We heard several Swainson's, but no Bicknell's. Before dawn the next day, we again ascended Mont Sir Wilfrid. The weather was a little better, still windy and misty, but not as nice as lower down the mountain. Again we heard many Swainson's but no Bicknell's.

We drove back to Aylmer, Quebec (near Ottawa), where we visited Michel Gosselin at the new headquarters of the Canadian Museum of Nature. Michel showed us the Bicknell's locations on the range map in the new *Quebec Breeding Bird Atlas*. He suggested we try Mont Megantic (1100 metres or 3600 feet) in the Eastern Townships, because there's a good paved road to the observatory at the top.

Compared to Mont Sir Wilfrid, Mont Megantic is easy to find and drive to the summit. There's inexpensive accommodation and food at the hotel in Notre Dame des Bois, along Highway 212. It is 12.5 km from the hotel to the observatory at the summit. Go north following the signs to Parc du Mont Megantic and the observatory. The last 1.5 km to the top has the best habitat. We heard Bicknell's Thrushes at the observatory and along the road at the big bend, 1.5 km below, where there's a good pull off. We heard mostly call notes. There are lots of Swainson's in the same habitat and at lower elevations, but their song and call notes are quite different. Bicknell's call note is a slurred *ve-eer*, suggesting a Veery, but more nasal and higher pitched. Bicknell's has another call note, like the first, but louder and piercing. Swainson's call is a much different emphatic *wick*. We heard only one Bicknell's singing. It

sang three times near the observatory, just before dark on 9 July. We seemed out of luck in seeing one this year, but we're going back next year after what we learned.

Back in the Ottawa area, I related our experiences to my old birding friend, Rick Poulin. Rick, formerly of the Canadian Museum of Nature, worked with Henri Ouellet on Bicknell's Thrush. Rick recommended several things to improve our chances of seeing Bicknell's next year. First, go during the first three weeks of June because singing drops off quickly afterwards, whereas Swainson's sing well into July. Second, use the songs from Monty Brigham's *Bird Sounds of Canada*, Vol. 2 CD # 2 Track 15, to attract them. Do not use Gray-cheeked songs; they will not attract Bicknell's. If tapes are used sparingly and with discretion, I see no problem using them in areas that are not heavily birded. Also, learn the Veery-like call notes to detect the presence of Bicknell's on territory. Best times are dawn and dusk when they are most active and vocal. Watch also for Bicknell's during the day in late June and July, when they are foraging for food to feed young. Note that Swainson's Thrushes are common in Bicknell's habitat at Mont Sir Wilfrid and Mont Megantic, but we encountered no Veeries or Hermit Thrushes. Finally, *Catharus* thrushes are tough birds to see on the breeding grounds. They are birds of the shadows and often sing from hidden perches. Have you ever tried to spot a singing Veery or Hermit Thrush?

The mountaintop habitat of Bicknell's Thrush is often described as "scrub spruces". However, on Mont

Sir Wilfrid and Mont Megantic the coniferous forest is 99 percent Balsam Fir, not spruce. The most common deciduous tree is White Birch at both locations. Keep in mind that mountaintop weather is variable, often windy and misty. It can be cold too, so take warm clothes. If you plan to go next year to get Bicknell's for your

Canadian and ABA lists, be sure to contact me for exact directions. I hope that I have intrigued you to attend the OFO Annual General Meeting on 19 October. Meet ornithologist Dr. Henri Ouellet and learn more about Bicknell's and other *Catharus* thrushes from the world's foremost expert. Don't miss this experience.

Ron Pittaway, Box 619, Minden, Ontario K0M 2K0

Editors' Note:

Bob Curry will be back doing the Photo Quiz in the December issue. Bob welcomes photos to analyze in future issues. If you have a favourite photo that would prove challenging to readers, please contact Bob or the editors.

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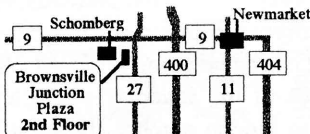
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