

SUCCESSFUL NESTING OF LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH IN WOODYARD HAMMOCK, LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA

RICHARD BREWER

*Department of Biological Sciences
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008*

There are few published records of Louisiana Waterthrushes (*Seiurus motacilla*) breeding in Florida (Stevenson 1961, 1978) and none indicating a successful nesting. Although territorial birds were recorded at Woodyard Hammock, Tall Timbers Research Station, Leon County, during three breeding-bird censuses (Engstrom 1981 and 1982, Baker 1989), no positive evidence of breeding was obtained. In 1991, I observed a juvenile bird being fed by an adult there.

Louisiana Waterthrushes were observed beginning in late March when I saw two birds, one in song, at a small (0.25 ha) gum (*Nyssa biflora*) pond on the west side of the Woodyard Hammock breeding-bird census plot. Over the next two and one-half months, I found birds repeatedly in three locations: (1) around the gum pond and a smaller pond about 30 m to the southwest, (2) along the stream that drains south through the hammock, and (3) at the southwest corner of the census plot in a low area that held pools and channels of standing water through most of this unusually wet breeding season.

At 1200 noon EDT on 9 June 1991, on the west side of the gum pond, I observed a Louisiana Waterthrush in juvenal plumage fly into a small tree and perch about 2.5 m up. The bird was wet and it spent the next several minutes ruffling its feathers, preening, and spreading its wings and tail.

I watched the bird until 1232, when it flew off. During the 30 minutes I watched, the bird was fed by an adult three times. The juvenile crouched but did not call or shiver its wings. During the time I watched, it changed perch twice but did not pursue the adult. I saw an adult bird occasionally feeding in shallow water at the edge of the pond and, on one occasion, singing about 6 m from the young bird.

The tail of the juvenile was short compared to the adult, its breast was paler and any barring was indistinct, and it had pale rictal flanges. Judging from the descriptions in Eaton (1958), I estimate that it was probably 7-9 days out of the nest. Assuming a clutch size of 5 eggs, an incubation period of 12 days, and a nestling period of 10 days (Eaton 1958), the first egg was probably laid about 6 May.

Howell (1932) indicated that the Louisiana Waterthrush was an uncommon migrant in Florida and casual in winter. Sprunt (1954), on the basis of April 1934 observations by L. Griscom and H. L. Stoddard in northern Leon Co. and late May 1935 observations by C. R. Mason in Gadsden Co., thought that the Louisiana Waterthrush might "have an altered status since Howell." The first documented nest in the state (five eggs) was found 8 April 1961 in Walton Co. (Stevenson 1961) at a site where a male or pair had also been seen the preceding two summers.

May-June records of singing birds in later years cited in American Birds (AB) include observations in Liberty (1965, AB 19:537), Alachua (1965, AB 22:601 and probably 1970, AB 24:594, though the latter could refer to Gilchrist or Columbia Co.), Leon (1972, AB 26:754 and 1974, AB 28:895), Escambia (1975, AB 29:866), Walton (1975, AB 29:994), and Jefferson (1981, AB 35:933) counties. Among these records, additional breeding evidence was obtained for two, the 1965 observation at Torreya State Park, Liberty Co. (nest from a previous year), and the 1972 observation from Lake Talquin, Leon Co. (adult carrying food in early May).

Kale and Maehr (1990) suggested that the species has been "expanding its range into northwest Florida." It is possible that the situation may be more complex than a simple southward range expansion dating from the 1930s. Bailey (1925), citing no supporting evidence, referred to the Louisiana Waterthrush as a breeding species. Gould (1933) recounted observations made in 1915 near Arcadia, DeSoto Co. (in lower central Florida), of a pair carrying food and giving alarm calls in late April. Although no nest was found, such observations would be considered confirmed breeding according to breeding-bird atlas criteria. Gould mentioned observing another pair in similar circumstances at Bradley Junction, Polk Co., about 100 km to the north.

Besides these observations of Gould, the only other records south of the northernmost tier of Florida counties are the two Alachua County observations. The 1970 observation lacks details, but the 1965 observation was of a nest found 15 May and abandoned (eggs missing) on 22 or 23 May (Austin 1965).

Based on the totality of observations, it seems likely that the Louisiana Waterthrush was a breeding member of the Florida avifauna for some indeterminate length of time prior to 1915. The near absence of breeding-season records from then to the early 1930s could be the result of a northward withdrawal or could be related to (1) the scarcity of waterthrushes in central Florida, based in part on restricted and declining habitat, combined with (2) the scarcity of ornithologists in northern Florida during this period. I lean toward the view that the decade prior to the 1930s was a time of low numbers, if not outright absence, for this reason: The upturn in records in northern Florida and also Grady Co., Georgia (Burleigh 1958), just over the line, is associated with the arrival of H. L. Stoddard (in 1924, Burleigh 1958) and H. M. Stevenson (in 1946, James 1992). There was, however, a 7-10 year lag after Stoddard's arrival until the first breeding-season observations in 1931 (Grady Co., Burleigh 1958) and 1934 (Leon Co., Sprunt 1954).

I am indebted to Tall Timbers Ecological Research Station and Todd Engstrom for the opportunity to make observations at this site. The observations were made during a sabbatical from Western Michigan University spent in the Department of Biological Science, Florida State University. Both institutions are gratefully acknowledged. Gail McPeck, Todd Engstrom, and an anonymous reviewer commented helpfully on the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- AUSTIN, O. L., JR. 1965. Louisiana Waterthrush (*Seiurus motacilla*) nesting in Gainesville. Fla. Nat. 38:144.
- BAILEY, H. H. 1925. The birds of Florida. Williams and Wilkins, Baltimore.
- BAKER, W. W. 1989. Mature beech-magnolia forest. J. Field Ornithol. 60 (suppl.):39.
- EATON, S. W. 1958. A life history of the Louisiana Waterthrush. Wilson Bull. 70:211-236.
- ENGSTROM, T. 1981. Mature beech-magnolia forest. Am. Birds 35 (1):58.
- ENGSTROM, T. 1982. Mature beech-magnolia forest. Am. Birds 36 (1):61.
- GOULD, J. E. 1933. Louisiana water thrush breeding in southern Florida. Raven 4 (June):3.
- JAMES, F. C. 1992. Henry M. Stevenson, 1914-1991. Fla. Field Nat. 20:21-22.
- KALE, H. W., II, AND D. S. MAEHR. 1990. Florida's birds, a handbook and reference. Pineapple Press, Sarasota.
- SPRUNT, A., JR. 1954. Florida bird life. New York, Coward-McCann, Inc., New York.
- STEVENSON, H. M. 1961. Nesting of the Louisiana Waterthrush in Florida. Fla. Nat. 34:223.
- STEVENSON, H. M. 1978. Louisiana Waterthrush. pages 63-64 in Rare and endangered biota of Florida. vol. 2, Birds. (H. W. Kale, II, ed.). University Presses of Florida, Gainesville.