

# FIRST UNITED STATES RECORD OF THE WHITE-THROATED ROBIN

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ON FEBRUARY 18, 1990, KRZYWOWSKI was birding in a residential neighborhood in Laguna Vista, Cameron County, lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas, when he observed an unfamiliar bird. He identified it as a White-throated Robin (*Turdus assimilis*). The bird was in the company of at least three Clay-colored Robins (*Turdus grayi*) frequenting a bird feeder on private property. The feeder was stocked with standard wild-bird seed, but a cluster of red grapes hung above it seemed to attract the robins. Immediately adjacent to the residential area was ten acres of native south Texas brush with a canopy height of approximately four meters. The vegetation in this habitat was mostly mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*), retama (*Parkinsonia aculeata*), and huisache (*Acacia smallii*).

There was no public access to the area. However, the property owner was willing to have the bird confirmed and photographed. A very small number of observers was invited to visit the area for that purpose. To our knowledge ten observers in all saw the bird (all but one of whom had previous experience with the species in Mexico). The bird was well-photographed by the authors and photos are on file with VIREO at the Academy of Natural Science at Philadelphia and



**The White-throated Robin was spotted in this country for the first time last year in Texas. Photograph/Mike Krzywowski.**

with the Texas Bird Records Committee. Written descriptions were prepared by most observers. The bird was last seen on the evening of February 25, 1990.

The following description was compiled from notes made during observations. The bird was obviously a *Turdus* thrush; size, body, and bill shape appeared virtually the same as a Clay-colored Robin by numerous direct comparisons. The head, back, wings, and tail all appeared to be dark olive-brown, noticeably darker than in nearby Clay-colored Robins. The head was

a little darker brown than the rest of the upperparts. The breast, belly, and flanks were a uniform grayish-brown, much paler than the back and lacking the buffy tones of the Clay-colored Robins. The undertail coverts were white. The throat was white and heavily streaked with dark brown. In certain postures the streaks on the throat were so close together that it was difficult to see the white between them. At other times, the dark streaks were noticeably set off against the white throat so as to be reminiscent of the throat pattern of a male Calliope Hummingbird. Below the throat was a white crescent on the upper breast that lacked any streaks and that was set off fairly sharply from the otherwise grayish-brown breast. The bird had a bright, complete, yellow eye-ring that was sharply set off against the otherwise dark brown face. Several observers described it as "really jumping out at you." The iris appeared dark brown. The bill was a pale brownish-green overall, with a dark brown culmen. The legs were pink.

The White-necked Robin or White-necked Thrush (*Turdus albicollis*) of South America regarded as conspecific with *assimilis* by many authors, is very similar to the White-throated Robin. The most similar subspecies of the White-necked Robin (*T. albicollis contemptus*), typically shows dark flanks that contrast more strongly with a whiter belly and lacks the bold, conspicuous eye-ring as seen on the Laguna Vista bird (J.V. Remsen, pers. comm.).

The White-throated Robin seemed to be loosely associating with several Clay-colored Robins frequenting the same feeder. It seemed shier than any other species in the vicinity. On its brief visits to the feeder, it plucked (usually on the wing) a grape from the hanging bunch and then quickly vanished back into the mesquite and brush.

Its visits to the feeder were less frequent than most other species in the area. For example, on February 22, Lasley observed the White-throated Robin make only six visits to the feeder between 0700 and 0930. These visits were brief, and the bird was out of sight for extended periods of time. Krzywowski observed the robin make at least fifty visits to the feeder during its eight-day stay.

The White-throated Robin is resident from southeastern Sonora, southwestern Chihuahua, Sinaloa, western Durango, Nayarit, Jalisco, Michoacán, the state of Mexico, Hidalgo, eastern San Luis Potosí, and southern Tamaulipas south along both slopes of Middle America to western Colombia and western Ecuador (A.O.U. 1983). The closest known population of White-throated Robins to Cameron County, Texas, is in the mountains of southern Tamaulipas, approximately 300 km south of Brownsville. There it is a common resident. We are aware of one additional record of this species closer to the Texas border: One was photographed with about 40 Clay-colored Robins on February 9, 1984 at La Cola de Caballo, Nuevo Leon (D. Sibley, pers. comm.). This location is approximately 200 km southwest of McAllen, Texas.

The presence of the White-throated Robin in Texas may be related to the extreme weather that occurred in Texas and northeastern Mexico during the winter of 1989-1990. A hard freeze plunged all the way to San Luis Potosí during the week of Christmas. During late December and early January, observers in southern Tamaulipas noted significant effects on the bird life of that region. The tropical native vegetation in lowland areas, as well as much of the cloud forest at mid-elevations, was devastated. In several areas, the odor of rotting vegetation was evident. Many tropical fruiting trees used by frugivores

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were severely damaged by the weather. As an apparent result, there was a larger-than-normal number of highland birds in lowland areas. It seems likely that many species were forced to search for food over a wider area than is typical.

There is always the possibility that certain Mexican species seen in the United States represent escaped caged birds because native birds are frequently kept captive south of the border. There is no way to rule out this possibility with 100 percent certainty, but for this record we believe the chances are minimal. Neither of us, nor any of several other observers widely traveled in Mexico, have seen this species caged in Mexico although we would not be surprised at reports of caged White-throated Robins. The Laguna Vista bird appeared to be in excellent plumage without any visible signs of cage wear, and seemed healthy and wary.

There is a previous sight record of a White-throated Robin on March 13-15, 1984 at San Benito, Cameron County, Texas (Lasley and Sexton 1984). This record lacks written or photographic documentation, but the individual was viewed by multiple observers familiar with the species (P. Moore, pers. comm.). The significance of the 1984 report is that it was within the same general time of year, the locality was only about 40 km away from the locality of the 1990 record and in the same

general habitat, and the winter weather of 1983-1984 was similar to that of 1989-1990.

The area along the lower Rio Grande contains by far the richest wooded habitat in the lowlands of the Tamaulipan biotic province. We suspect that as land disturbance continues in northern Mexico, we will see more Mexican species taking advantage of the remaining native thorn-forest along the Rio Grande corridor on the Texas side of the river. The woodlands, native and planted, in the lower Rio Grande valley will probably continue to provide a refuge for various insectivorous and frugivorous birds during future harsh freezes or other major environmental disturbances. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary we regard the Laguna Vista White-throated Robin as a naturally occurring vagrant bird. ■

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