



Wildlife Note — 46
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Thrushes

by Chuck Fergus

More than three hundred species of thrushes live worldwide. North America has 15 species, seven of which breed in the Northeast; an eighth, the gray-cheeked thrush, passes through our region during migration. Thrushes have thin bills and strong legs. They often forage on the ground, searching in leaf litter and on lawns for insects and other invertebrates such as spiders, earthworms and snails; they eat berries in late summer, in fall, and (if they do not migrate south) in winter. Juveniles' spotted breasts help camouflage them. Hawks, falcons, owls, foxes, mink and house cats prey on thrushes. Blue jays, grackles, crows, raccoons, weasels, squirrels, chipmunks and snakes eat eggs and nestlings.

Many thrushes sing complex mellifluous songs that delight human listeners. Most thrushes build open cup-shaped nests secured to branches of low trees and shrubs. Some robins nest on building ledges and other flat surfaces; bluebirds choose tree cavities or artificial nesting boxes; and hermit thrushes and veeries often nest on the ground. The females do most of the actual nest construction. The typical clutch is four or five eggs; all of the species breeding in the Northeast lay pale blue or blue-green eggs. Females do most or all of the incubating, and both parents feed the young.

Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) — This familiar species nests across much of the East and winters south to Nicaragua. A bluebird is six inches long and weighs about an ounce; it has a vivid blue back and wings and a ruddy breast. When not nesting, bluebirds wander in small feeding flocks. They favor semi-open habitats: orchards, pastures, hayfields, fence lines, cut-over or burned areas, forest clearings, open woodlots, and suburban gardens and parks. The song consists of three or more soft, melodious notes ("tury, cherwee, cheye-ley," as one observer has rendered it).

Bluebirds eat crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, caterpillars, and many other insects, and they take spiders, centipedes, earthworms and snails. Often they sit on a low perch, then flutter down to catch prey. In fall and winter they turn to fruits, including those of sumac, dogwood, Virginia creeper, poison ivy, pokeweed, elderberry, wild cherry, bittersweet, honeysuckle and wild grape.



Eastern Bluebird

The courting male sings to the female and flutters close to her with his wings and tail spread; he may pass food to her. Mated pairs preen each other's feathers. A study in New York found that bluebird territories used for mating, nesting and feeding averaged more than five acres. Bluebirds nest in abandoned woodpecker holes, tree cavities, hollow fenceposts, and artificial boxes put up for them by humans; bluebirds may face stiff competition for these sites from starlings, house sparrows, tree swallows and house wrens, all of which have been known to kill adult bluebirds. The female builds a loose nest inside the cavity out of grasses and weed stalks, sometimes lining a central cup with feathers or animal hair. Early nesters, bluebirds lay first clutches by late March or early April and second clutches by early June. The three to six eggs (usually four or five) are pale blue and unmarked. The female incubates them for about two weeks. Both parents feed the nestlings. After about 18 days, fledglings leave the nest. A second clutch will usually have one fewer egg than a first clutch produced by the same pair.

Bluebirds are permanent residents in the southern parts

Veery



of their range; in winter, bluebirds from northern areas may shift southward. In mild winters many bluebirds may be found in the agricultural valleys of central Pennsylvania. Bluebirds arrive back on their breeding grounds in March and April, welcomed as harbingers of spring by winter-weary rural folk. Bluebirds nest statewide in Pennsylvania, avoiding deep woods and wooded ridges. The population of *Sialia sialis* probably peaked around 1900, when farmland covered two-thirds of the state; the number of bluebirds waned for many years thereafter as unprofitable acres were abandoned and grew back up in forest, but bluebird numbers have risen over the last several decades, thanks to thousands of bluebird boxes put up by humans.

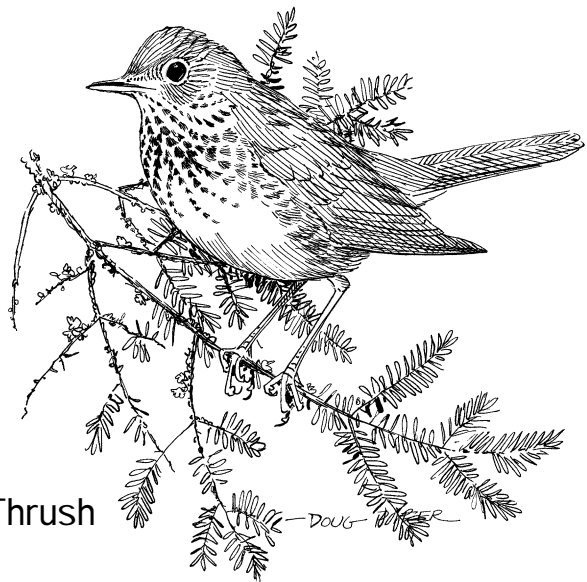
Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*) — Named for its call, this woodland thrush has a reddish brown head, back and tail and a faintly spotted breast. It breeds in southern Canada and in the northern United States, south in the Appalachians to Georgia; in Pennsylvania, where it arrives in May, it is most common in the northern half of the state, especially on the Pocono Plateau. The veery favors damp deciduous forest with a dense undergrowth of shrubs and ferns. Where its range overlaps that of the wood thrush and hermit thrush, the veery will be found in wetter, younger woods. Its song is a delicate, flutelike *da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer*. Mainly a ground forager, the veery feeds on insects (60 percent of its diet) and fruit (40 percent). In an Ontario study, individual territories averaged slightly more than half an acre.

The female builds a nest in a dense shrub near ground level or on the ground itself, often hiding it in vegetation at the base of a bush or small tree or in a brushpile. She lays three to five (usually four) pale blue eggs and incubates them for 10 to 14 days. Brown-headed cowbirds lay eggs in

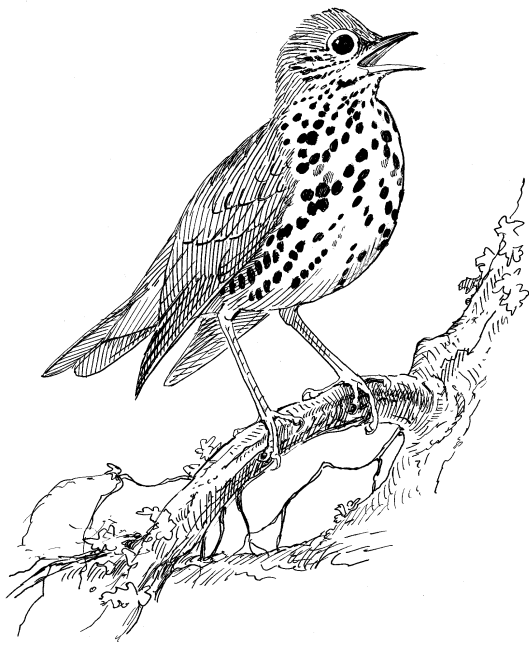
the nests of veeries, who make no attempt to remove the eggs and, instead, raise the cowbird or cowbirds along with their own young. Chipmunks sometimes prey on eggs and nestlings. The male helps to rear the brood, and the young leave the nest 10 to 12 days after hatching. Veeries migrate at night. They winter in South America east of the Andes, mainly in Bolivia and Brazil.

Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*) — This shy, elusive bird breeds in spruce forests and in alder and willow thickets in northern Canada and Alaska. Gray-cheeked thrushes pass through Pennsylvania in May and again in September and October. They forage on the ground, usually in dense woods, and a birdwatcher must be both stealthy and patient to catch a glimpse. The species winters in South America. The closely related Bicknell's thrush (*Catharus bicknelli*) was recently separated as a distinct species from the gray-cheeked. Nesting in mountaintops of New England and in Maritime Canada, it probably passes through the state annually, but is rarely distinguished from the gray-cheeked.

Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) — A common migrant seen in woodlots and parks during spring and fall, this shy thrush nests regularly in Pennsylvania, in but a scattering of northern-tier counties. It breeds in New England, across Canada and Alaska, and in the U. S. Northwest. The Swainson's thrush (also called the olive-backed thrush) can be distinguished by bold buffy rings that surround its dark eyes. The melodious call features flute-like phrases. Swainson's thrushes inhabit coniferous woods, generally spruce but also hemlock, where it nests in shrubby trees 2 to 10 feet above ground. Like the other thrushes, it feeds mainly on insects and berries. Swainson's thrushes winter in tropical forests. The species' name memorializes an English ornithologist.



Hermit Thrush



Wood Thrush

Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) — Mid-April to early May is when the first calls of wood thrushes are likely to be heard percolating through the woods in central Pennsylvania. The flutelike song is usually rendered as *ee-o-lay*, and it goes on increasingly through May, especially at dawn and dusk. Wood thrushes have reddish heads, olive backs and tails, and prominently spotted breasts; they are not as shy as other forest thrushes nor as bold as robins. Wood thrushes feed on beetles, caterpillars, crickets, ants, moths and sowbugs, plus spiders, earthworms and snails. They also eat many fruits and berries. Wood thrushes nest throughout eastern North America. They are statewide in Pennsylvania in moist lowland woods, dry upland forests, wooded ravines, orchards, city parks and wooded suburbs. Territories range in size from a quarter of an acre to two acres.

The female builds her nest on a branch or in a fork of a tree 6 to 50 feet above ground (on average, 10 feet high), using grasses, moss, bark and leaves cemented together with mud. An inner cup is lined with rootlets. The nest looks like a robin's nest but is smaller (a maximum of five and a half inches in diameter, compared to the robin's six and a half inches). Three to four eggs are usual for a first clutch, any later ones will have two to three eggs. The eggs are pale greenish blue. The young hatch after two weeks and leave the nest some 12 days later. Brown-headed cowbirds frequently parasitize wood thrush nests, although in some cases the foreign young may not affect the growth or success of the host's young. House cats, black rat snakes, flying squirrels, grackles, blue jays, weasels and white-footed mice take eggs, nestlings and young. In Delaware, a study of 378 wood thrush nests that did not fledge young found that 71 percent had been lost to predation.

Wood thrushes stop singing in late summer but continue to sound *bwubububub* contact notes and *bweebbeebee* alarm calls. They head south in August and September to forests from southeastern Mexico to Panama. The wood thrush population has declined markedly since the 1980s, perhaps because fragmented forests in the Northeast make thrush nests more accessible to predators and to cowbirds, which dwell in more open country. Wood thrushes have also lost crucial habitat through deforestation on their wintering range.

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) — This widespread, adaptable songbird is found in many different habitats, including towns, cities, farmland, cut-over areas, woods edges and deep woods. Early settlers named it after the European robin. The American species is about 10 inches long and has dark upperparts and a brick-red breast, both colors more intense in males than in females, plus a white eye-ring. Juveniles have paler colors and spotted breasts. Only the males sing, a hearty *cheeriup*, *cheerily*, *cheeriup* given repeatedly. Robins feed on beetles and other insects, earthworms and fruits, both wild and cultivated; fruit makes up some 60 percent of the annual diet. Robins often hunt for prey on lawns; they take earthworms that surface after the soil has been soaked by rain. Robins locate their prey mainly by sight rather than by sound.

Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) — Many observers credit this thrush with the loveliest of all bird songs, described as *Oh, holy holy-ah, purity purity, -eeh, sweetly sweetly*. The hermit thrush has a rufous tail and an olive head (in contrast with the wood thrush, which has an olive tail and a rufous head) and a spotted breast. When startled, a hermit thrush will usually fly to a perch and stare at an intruder while flicking its wings and slowly raising and lowering its tail.

The species' breeding range extends from Canada south into mountainous northern and central Pennsylvania. Hermit thrushes inhabit cool, damp mixed deciduous and coniferous woods. As quiet and unobtrusive as their name implies, they spend much time in the lower branches of undergrowth, and on the forest floor where they forage for insects (including beetles, caterpillars, bees, ants, wasps, flies and bugs) by hopping, then stopping, staring, and thrusting with the bill. Animal matter makes up 90 percent of the diet in spring, 40 percent in winter. Hermit thrushes eat fruits of elderberry, pokeberry, dogwood, greenbrier, juneberry, sumac, poison ivy and other plants.

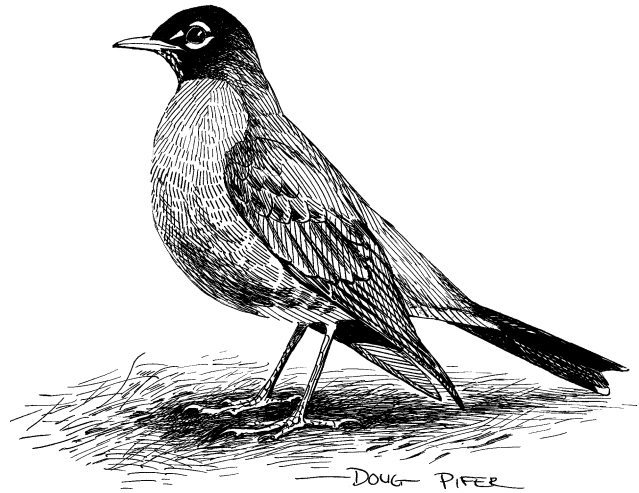
Males arrive on the breeding range in April, in advance of females. Late snowstorms that cover up food sources may kill many early birds. Females usually build their nests on the ground (but also sometimes in trees two to eight feet above ground), hiding them beneath boughs, weaving together twigs, bark fibers, ferns, mosses and grasses, and adding a soft lining of conifer needles, plant fibers and rootlets. The three to four eggs are pale blue. The female incubates them for about 12 days, and the young are able to fly after an additional 12 days. Some pairs raise two broods. Individuals have been known to survive more than eight years, but most do not live that long. The hermit thrush winters over much of the southern United States, south through Mexico to Guatemala. The only species in genus *Catharus* to winter in North America, the hermit thrush has not had its population harmed as badly as those of some other thrushes by the rampant cutting of tropical forests.

American Robin

Robins arrive on their breeding territories in late March and early April; individuals may have wintered far to the south, or close by in wooded or brushy swamps. Males home strongly to areas where they were born. They begin to establish territories which, as the breeding season progresses, resolve themselves into about a third of an acre. The territories of several males may overlap along their edges. Males may roost communally at night, then resume defending their territories during the day.

Ornithologists have not discerned any specific courtship behavior; pairs simply get together. The male brings nest material to the female, and she weaves together grasses, weedstalks and string, plastering them with mud and repeatedly forming a central cup with her own body. (Females often show a muddy band on the breast during nest-building.) The cup is lined with fine grasses. Nests may be built in trees (in conifers for first broods, before deciduous trees have put forth leaves), on porch supports, windowsills, sturdy shrubs, and bridge and barn beams; sometimes robins repair and reuse their previous year's nest.

The female lays three to seven eggs (usually four), which are colored the distinctive "robin's-egg" blue. Unlike many other thrushes, robins discern and eject cowbird eggs. The female does all of the incubating and leaves the nest for about 10 minutes per hour to feed herself. Male robins sing most vociferously just before broods hatch, some 12 to 14 days after the eggs are laid. Both parents feed the young,



mainly on insects and earthworms, and they leave the nest after about 14 days. The male may take over feeding a first brood while his mate begins a second nesting. Pairs start breaking up and communal flocks begin forming in July and August. The flocks move around to find trees and shrubs that have good crops of berries, and in October most of the flocks fly south. Although some robins winter in the north, most migrate to the southern states, with some going as far as Guatemala. Robins may share winter roosts with European starlings, common grackles and brown-headed cowbirds. In Pennsylvania, the American robin is thought to be the most abundant bird species.

Wildlife Notes are available from the
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