

### Gray-cheeked Thrush

*Tony Leukering*

#### **Tips for a Tricky Colorado Identification**

Colorado plays host to four of the five species of *Catharus* thrush that breed in the US and Canada. Three of these species breed in the state, but Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*) is of annual spring occurrence on the eastern plains in low enough numbers to be a review species (Semo et al. 2002). Due to the tricky nature of *Catharus* thrush identification and the difficulty, in many cases, of getting satisfactory views of these skulking birds, the species is probably both under-reported and over-reported in the state. As there is only one fall report from the state (Andrews and Righter 1992), this discussion will focus only on spring occurrence and identification.

The standard field guides do a fairly poor job of delineating those features useful in identification of *Catharus* thrushes, both in text and in illustration. This is largely due to space constraints and the relatively large range of variation among the various subspecies. Additionally, these guides tend to treat the identification of Gray-cheeked Thrush from an eastern perspective, as the species is primarily an eastern North American migrant. In the East, it is often compared to Swainson's Thrush.

Here in Colorado, and elsewhere in the western interior, the species most likely to cause confusion is Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), particularly the large, pale, and dull subspecies *auduboni*, which is the form found breeding in the state. Three other subspecies of Hermit Thrush are known to pass through Colorado on their spring migrations (*euborius*, *guttatus*, and *oromelus*), but these are smaller and brighter with more contrasting tails than *auduboni* shows and should cause little or no confusion. (For brief details of these subspecies, see Bailey and Niedrach 1965 and Pyle 1997).

Despite the species name, *minimus*, Gray-cheeked Thrush is a large *Catharus* thrush sporting very long wings. Though some individuals nearly lack eye rings, most have a whitish eye ring that is most apparent behind the eye and is often incomplete. The loreal area is pale, not contrasting with the rest of the face. The auriculars (cheeks) are distinctly gray and vaguely streaked or mottled and contrast strongly with a pale "ear surround" (a pale extension behind the auriculars of the lower edge of the malar stripe (*sensu* Sibley 2000)). The base of the mandible is yellow and the lateral throat stripes are black.

Our subject species has the densest chest spotting of any *Catharus* and that spotting is black on the upper chest and fades to gray on the upper belly. The wing panel—created by the more rufescent edges to the outer primaries—is variably contrasting, but on many individuals contrasting as much as that of *auduboni* Hermit Thrushes. The wingtip projection (distance from tip of longest tertial to tip of longest primary) is the longest of any *Catharus*. However, as the species' tail is also fairly long, the ratio of wingtip projection to the distance between tertial tip and tail tip is similar to that of many

**The species:** Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*)

**The context:** Spring migration in eastern Colorado

**The problem:** Standard field guides treat the identification of *Catharus* thrushes in too little detail and from a primarily eastern perspective.

*(See photos on back cover.)*

of the other temperate-zone *Catharus*. Though tail color is usually depicted in field guides as similar to and not contrasting with the upperparts, Gray-cheeked Thrush has a tail with a slight to moderate rufescent cast, particularly in strong light (see discussion on light, below).

Table 1 (see next page) compares a host of features of Gray-cheeked and *auduboni* Hermit Thrushes to assist with the separation of the two. As with many difficult species, utilizing as many characters as possible will more often yield the correct identification of this rare Colorado species. A key character not mentioned in the table is a behavioral one that is absolute: the tail-lifting of Hermit Thrush. If a suspected Gray-cheeked Thrush slowly lifts its tail and returns it to the horizontal, it is a Hermit Thrush.

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Finally, the two smaller pictures on the back cover illustrate quite well the strong influence that light plays in the apparent color tone of Gray-cheeked Thrush—and all other *Catharus* thrushes. All pictures on the back cover are of the same individual; note the much grayer appearance of the bird in shade and the warmer appearance of the bird in partial sun and consider this facet of plumage color when looking at any *Catharus* thrush.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Christopher L. Wood and Lawrence S. Semo for reviewing previous drafts of this manuscript.

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Table 1. Comparison of features of Gray-cheeked Thrush with those of auduboni Hermit Thrush.

	Gray-cheeked Thrush <i>aliciae</i>	Hermit Thrush <i>auduboni</i>
Size	Large <sup>1</sup>	Large
Bill	Black with restricted dull yellow base of mandible	Black with extensive orangish-pink base to mandible
Loral region	Pale gray	Gray-brown lores contrasting with buff supraloral
Lateral throat stripes <sup>2</sup>	Medium-width, black	Wide, black
Eye ring	Usually thin, whitish, most apparent behind eye; often incomplete	Medium-width, whitish to pale gray, often broken in front
Auriculars	Medium gray, with vague streaking or mottling	Medium gray-brown
Ear surround <sup>3</sup>	Long, medium width, pale to medium buff	Short, medium buff
Back color	Brownish-olive	Medium to pale grayish-brown
Wing panel <sup>4</sup>	Low to medium contrast	Low to medium contrast
Wingtip projection <sup>5</sup>	Very long; about half tertial tip to tail tip length; 7-8 primary tips visible	Long; about half tertial tip to tail tip length; 6-7 primary tips visible
Chest spotting	Extensive spotting of smaller spots, black on upper chest fading to gray on upper belly	Large, black through lower chest, gray on upper belly
Flanks	Grayish-brown to brownish-olive	Medium to pale grayish-brown

<sup>1</sup>Descriptions in table modified from those presented in Pyle (1997) and Sibley (2000).

<sup>2</sup>*sensu* Sibley (2000)

<sup>3</sup>Usually pale extension of lower edge of malar stripe (*sensu* Sibley 2000) below and behind auriculars

<sup>4</sup>On the folded wing, the relative contrast of the more reddish edges of the outer 3-4 primaries with the rest of the wing, forming a distinct, but thin, panel at the leading edge of the wing

<sup>5</sup>A composite feature incorporating actual wing length, extension of primary tips beyond tertial tips, and tail length



Gray-cheeked Thrush, Ft. Lupton,  
Weld County, May 14, 2006  
*Photos by Tony Leukering*

