

Russet-backed Thrush in Colorado

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During Steve Mlodinow's youth in Chicago, he cracked open an old tome on the birds of the Chicago Region and found many surprises. One of those was the Olive-backed Thrush, which he'd never heard of, yet it was listed as a common migrant. After a few moments of head scratching, it dawned on him that it was the race of Swainson's Thrush that migrated through Chicago. Twenty years later, as he was driving down a road in southern California, a rusty-backed thrush flew in front of Mlodinow's car. He stammered, "Wawawawas that a Vvveery?" His companion, a crusty Californian, smiled and said, "You Easterners all make that mistake. That's a Swainson's Thrush, the Russet-backed Thrush. Nearly as bright as a Veery...."

As it is for many birders, Mlodinow's introduction to the two subspecies groups of Swainson's Thrush – Olive-backed Thrush (subspecies group *Catharus ustulatus swainsoni*) and Russet-backed Thrush (subspecies group *C. u. ustulatus*) – was not via a field guide.

Taxonomic History and Relationships

We here follow the taxonomy of Mack and Young (2000) and Ruegg (2007). The Russet-backed Thrush subspecies group includes *C. u. ustulatus*, *phillipsi*, and *oedicus*. The Olive-backed Thrush subspecies group includes *C. u. swainsoni* (which includes *almae*), *incanus*, and *appalachiensis*. The genetic distance between these two taxa appears to be more typical of well-differentiated subspecies than of fully differentiated sister species, and though the songs are somewhat different, that difference is within the range of dialect differences within other species. On the other hand, both *ustulatus* and *swainsoni* are reliably diagnosable using mitochondrial or nuclear DNA, they appear to have geographically distinct evolutionary histories, and the hybrid zone is narrow (similar to that between Townsend's and Hermit Warblers or Red-naped and Red-breasted Sapsuckers), suggesting a strong barrier to gene flow (Ruegg et al. 2006a, Ruegg 2007, Ruegg 2008). Further research may prove that these taxa are separate at the species level, rather than the subspecific level.

General Distribution

The Russet-backed Thrush breeds in coastal regions (including the west slope of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada mountains) from southeastern Alaska to southern California (AOU 1998, Ruegg 2007);

it winters primarily from Panama north to southern Tamaulipas in northeastern Mexico and to Nayarit in northwestern Mexico (AOU 1998, Ruegg 2007). The Olive-backed Thrush breeds from western and central Alaska, central Yukon, and western Mackenzie District south through the eastern Cascade Mountains into the southern Sierra Nevada, southeast into the southern Rocky Mountains, and east to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia; it winters primarily from Panama south to western South America (AOU 1998, Ruegg 2007). For range maps, including notation of the subspecies contained within each subspecies group, see Dunn and Alderfer (2011).

The migratory path of Russet-backed Thrush seems poorly known, as it is not mentioned in AOU (1998), and Ruegg (2007) simply states that the Russet-backed Thrush follows a “western route.” On the other hand, the migratory route of Olive-backed Thrush is fairly well known: northbound migration occurs across the United States

Figs. 1-2 (back cover): A Russet-backed Thrush photographed at Marymoor Park, near Seattle, Washington, 18 May 2009, well within the core of this taxon's range. The top photograph demonstrates how uniform in coloration Russet-backed Thrushes typically appear. The lower photo shows the typical chest pattern, with smaller and more poorly defined chest speckling. In both photos, a hint of the buffy flanks can be detected. Photographs by Gregg Thompson.

Fig. 3 (opposite): A Russet-backed Thrush in Colorado, at Andrick Ponds SWA, Morgan County, 6 May 2012. The bird's overall uniform coloration is evident, as are the bright buffy flanks. Also note the diffuse chest spotting. Photograph by Steven G. Mlodinow.

Fig. 4 (opposite): Olive-backed Thrush, Washtucna, Adams County, Washington, 29 May 2010. The contrast between the buffy and gray portions of the bird is evident, as are the gray flanks. Photograph by Steven G. Mlodinow.

Fig. 5 (opposite): Olive-backed Thrush, Crow Valley, Weld County, Colorado, 16 May 2011. This bird nicely demonstrates the larger and darker breast spotting typical of the Olive-backed Thrush. In addition, note the contrast between gray and buffy portions of the bird, and gray flanks. Photograph by Steven G. Mlodinow.

Fig. 6 (opposite): This enigmatic Swainson's Thrush is most likely a Russet-backed × Olive-backed Thrush intergrade (an identification supported by K. Ruegg, pers. comm.). Primarily, note the rusty back combined with the gray flanks. Additionally, there is a splash of russet on the flanks and relatively heavy spotting on the chest. Crow Valley, Weld County, Colorado, 24 May 2012. Photograph by Steven G. Mlodinow.

and Canada, excepting the Pacific Coast (AOU 1998, Mack and Young 2000), and southbound migration is shifted farther east (Mack and Young 2000, Ruegg 2007).

The hybrid zone between Russet-backed and Olive-backed Thrushes appears to extend from Alaska's Tongass National Wildlife Refuge south into British Columbia's Fraser River valley, and then near the crest of the Cascade Mountains through Washington into Oregon's Siskiyou Mountains, and then down the crest of the Sierra Nevadas in California (Ruegg 2008). The width of the hybrid zone is about 80 km per Ruegg (2008).

Colorado Distribution

The predominant form of Swainson's Thrush in Colorado is the Olive-backed, which occurs as both a breeder and a migrant. During the breeding season, it is found primarily in mid-elevation montane



Fig. 3. Russet-backed Thrush, Morgan County, Colorado, 6 May 2012.



Fig. 4. Olive-backed Thrush, Adams County, Washington, 29 May 2010.



Fig. 5. Olive-backed Thrush, Weld County, Colorado, 16 May 2011.



Fig. 6. Possible Russet-backed x Olive-backed Thrush intergrade, Weld County, Colorado, 24 May 2012.

streamside thickets of willow and/or alder (Pantle 1998). Fairly large stretches of suitable habitat are required, and given that the preferred breeding habitat tends to be linear in Colorado's mountains, the species is generally uncommon during the breeding season; there are few places where one can hear more than two or three singing Olive-backed Thrushes at once.

During migration, the Olive-backed Thrush occurs nearly throughout the state. In the mountains and in western Colorado, it is a rather uncommon spring migrant and even less common during fall, being far outnumbered by Hermit Thrush during both seasons. On the eastern plains, however, the Olive-backed Thrush is a common to abundant spring migrant and fairly common during fall migration, fitting the continent-wide pattern noted above. Spring migration occurs from late April into early June, with peak occurrence approximately 10-25 May. The roughly 1200 seen on 20 May 2000 in the northwestern corner of Chico Basin Ranch, El Paso County (T. Leukering, pers. obs.), best illustrates how numerous this taxon can be. Counts of 100+ at some of the better oases on the plains are of regular occurrence during May. Fall migration occurs mostly from late August through early October, with a trickle of sightings into early November. Peak occurrence is during the second week of September. As noted above, the Olive-backed Thrush is far scarcer during fall, with peak counts more in the range of five birds at a given site rather than 100.

The status of Russet-backed Thrush in Colorado is very poorly known. Three of the state's seven reports are of birds banded at Chico Basin Ranch, and a single birder is responsible for three of the remaining four records. This circumstance is likely the result of low birder awareness of the form, in general, and of its occurrence in the state, specifically. Records of Russet-backed Thrush from Colorado appear in Table 1; records from elsewhere in the United States east

*Table 1. Records of Russet-backed Thrush from Colorado. Specimens are indicated by † and records accepted by the CBRC are indicated by *.*

† 22 Sep 1934; female; City Park, Denver, Denver County; H. H. Nininger; DMNS 14631 (Bailey and Niedrach 1937)

† 20 May, year unknown; Wheat Ridge, Jefferson County; specimen in DMNS, reviewed by Mario Ramos in Phillips 1991

* 19 May 2006; Chico Basin Ranch, El Paso County; B. Gibbons (banded; photo)

* 30 May 2006; Chico Basin Ranch, El Paso County; B. Maynard (banded; photo)

* 13 May 2010; Chico Basin Ranch, El Paso County; B. Gibbons (banded; photo)

* 19 May 2011; Lake Estes, Larimer County; S. Mlodinow

6 May 2012; Andrick Ponds State Wildlife Area, Morgan County; S. Mlodinow (photo)

* 13-16 May 2012; southern Prowers County; S. Mlodinow, J. Stulp (photo)

Table 2. Published reports of Russet-backed Thrush from the United States east of the Continental Divide. Specimens are indicated by †.

† Shelter Island, New York 2 October 1884 (Todd 1931)¹
† Smith's Island, Virginia, 22 May 1899 (Todd 1931, AOU 1957)²
† Virginia, September 1964 (Phillips 1991; US Museum of Natural History)
† near Charleston, South Carolina, 18 October 1901 (Wayne 1921, AOU 1931)^{1,2}
† near Charleston, South Carolina, 22 October 1901 (Wayne 1920, AOU 1931)^{1,2}
† near Charleston, South Carolina, 3 May 1902 (Wayne 1920, AOU 1931)^{1,2}
† Keokuk County, Iowa, 20 May 1907 (Dumont 1929, AOU 1957)²
† Dunklin County, Missouri, 14 May 1896 (Wayne 1926, AOU 1931)^{1,2}
† Northwestern Nebraska, late 1890s, (Sharpe et al. 2001)
† Southwestern Luna County, New Mexico, 3 May 1892 (Oberholser 1918)³
University of New Mexico, Bernalillo County, 11 May 2011 (Matt O'Donnell, eBird data)
2 birds, El Paso, Texas, 12-21 May 2003 (Lockwood 2003)³
† San Antonio, Texas, 25 April 1890 (Oberholser 1974)³
† Presidio County, Texas, 12 May 1890 (Oberholser 1974)³

¹ Several records were included in AOU (1931) but not AOU (1957) for reasons of which we are unaware but likely represent re-evaluation of the specimens concerned.

² Specimens re-evaluated and identified as either Olive-backed Thrush or Veery (*C. fuscescens*) in Phillips (1991).

³ Records from southern New Mexico and southwestern Texas fit, more or less, the vaguely described migratory path of Russet-backed Thrush noted above; notably, southern New Mexico and southwestern Texas are considered part of the taxon's normal migratory route by Phillips (1991). Unfortunately, Oberholser (1974) did not comment upon the status of Russet-backed Thrush in Texas beyond "Migration," followed by the listing of the two specimen records included herein. This species is probably a rare migrant in westernmost Texas, with occurrence being annual (or nearly so) in El Paso (M. Lockwood, pers. comm.).

of the Continental Divide are listed in Table 2. Note that Colorado reports follow the pattern of Olive-backed Thrush occurrence elsewhere on the plains.

Identification

The separation of Russet-backed and Olive-backed Thrushes (excluding juveniles) is surprisingly straightforward given good views and some experience. The discussion below is derived mostly from Lane and Jaramillo (2000), Mack and Yong (2000), a review of specimens at the University of Puget Sound's Slater Museum, and the field experience of Mlodinow. This section should be read in concert with study of the back-cover photographs.

Dorsal Coloration – Russet-backed Thrush: rusty brown, reminiscent of that of a Veery, but not quite as bright; some individuals with tail and uppertail coverts slightly brighter than back

Olive-backed Thrush: olive-brown to gray-brown; no contrast between tail and back

Sides – Russet-backed Thrush: brownish with buffy hues which are most obvious at flanks

Olive-backed Thrush: gray or brownish-gray

Chest – Russet-backed Thrush: buffy; relatively few spots, which are mostly somewhat blurry and small, trending toward a well-marked Veery

Olive-backed Thrush: buffy; spots larger, darker, denser, and better-defined, trending toward Hermit Thrush

Vocalizations - Ruegg et al. (2006b), working in five locations in the Pacific Northwest, found statistically significant differences between the songs of the two forms, with the songs of Olive-backed averaging shorter, and the first part of their songs averaging lower in pitch. However, recordings from across the species' range suggest that continent-wide variation in these characters is tremendous, and in Colorado, it is probably impossible to separate Russet-backed from Olive-backed with confidence by song, at least on current knowledge.

The “flight call” of the two forms appears similar: a mellow, rising whistled “weee,” sometimes slightly burry, that can sound much like the call of the Spring Peeper frog. Despite its name, the flight call is often given by perched birds. It is quite variable; consecutive calls by an individual bird may vary in length, pitch, amount of pitch change, and level of burriness.

The “contact call” of the two forms seems to differ slightly on average. Olive-backed tends to give a quick, sharp “quit” that may recall the sound of a dripping faucet or the “whit” of an *Empidonax* flycatcher. In Russet-backed, this call is often slightly longer and more musical, an obviously upslurred whistle that might be transliterated as “wee” or “pwee,” like a shorter, sharper version of the flight call.

However, a large dose of caution is necessary when listening to these calls. In a five-minute recording from northern California on the Macaulay Library website (<http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/119447>), an individual Russet-backed Thrush gives a series of “typical” contact calls of Olive-backed Thrush (1:25 – 1:50); a series of “typical” contact calls of Russet-backed Thrush (2:20 – 2:35); and a wide variety of “flight calls” (0:37 – 0:43, 2:49, and 3:43 – 3:48). At least some individual Olive-backed Thrushes give equally variable calls.

Perhaps the most distinctive vocalization is the alarm call, which is a two-part call ending in a low, loud, semi-musical purr or chatter. Olive-backed tends to introduce the chatter with a sound like the contact call, “quit-BRRR,” while Russet-backed tends to begin with

a much longer and more musical note that is actually more like the flight call: “weee-BRRR.”

Overall, vocalizations, especially contact and alarm calls, can lend support to the identification of these subspecies groups, but should not be considered diagnostic. Use voice in conjunction with other field marks.

Other Comments – The spectacle on a Russet-backed Thrush tends to be narrower and buffier, thus blending in with the face more, than the spectacle on an Olive-backed Thrush, partly explaining Easterners’ tendency to mistake Russet-backed for Veeries. Taken as a whole, the Russet-backed Thrush is not only distinctly rustier in appearance, but also more uniform, with little contrast between the warm hues of face and chest and those of the back and sides. In Olive-backed Thrush, the buffy face and chest often contrast rather markedly with the rest of the bird, which is much grayer.

Conclusion

The two subspecies groups of the Swainson’s Thrush, the Russet-backed and Olive-backed Thrushes, may act as biological species, though the genetic evidence so far does not quite support this conclusion. These two taxa are visually distinctive, and since the hybrid zone is narrow, intergrades should be low in number. Current evidence suggests that the Russet-backed Thrush has a much wider range, at least as a vagrant, in central and eastern North America than previously appreciated, and it is a bird that should be actively sought by Colorado birders so that a better understanding of its distribution can be obtained.

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