

First Record of Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) for British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) is a species of passerine that is found breeding in deciduous and mixed wooded habitats in eastern North America from New Brunswick and southwestern Nova Scotia, southern Quebec, and southern Ontario (Evans *et al.* 2011). Birds breed as far north as the southern shore of Lake Superior, northern Minnesota, south to northern Florida and along the Gulf Coast with the exception of areas such as southernmost Louisiana and extreme southeastern Texas, west to eastern parts of Great Plains from east Texas to southeastern South Dakota with birds found in riparian zones and wooded towns and along the length of the Missouri River in central South Dakota, and west-central Minnesota (Evans *et al.* 2011). There are reports of isolated nesting and individuals singing on territory north of the species' normal range in northern Nova Scotia, northern New Brunswick, in southern Manitoba in Riding Mountain National Park, north-central Minnesota, and east North Dakota; and west to west-central Oklahoma and Kansas (Evans *et al.* 2011). The Wood Thrush is a declining Neotropical migrant due to habitat loss and problems from Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) parasitism at nest sites (Evans *et al.* 2011).

The Wood Thrush is a trans-Gulf migrant crossing the Gulf of Mexico to reach eastern North America on its migration to and from Mexico (Evans *et al.* 2011). This species winters in Middle America, mainly in lowlands along the Atlantic slope from southeastern San Luis Potosí, Mexico, but more commonly from southern Veracruz, south to western half of Panama, and on the Pacific slope from eastern Oaxaca, Mexico, south to western Chiriquí province of west Panama (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989, Stiles and Skutch 1989, Howell and Webb 2010). The Wood Thrush is an occasional to very rare species in the winter in the southeastern United States, especially in Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). This species is also found in the winter throughout the western Caribbean and northwestern Mexico (Howell and Webb 2010), and in northern areas such as Curaçao, Colombia in South America (Ridgely and Tudor 1989). There are scattered records from eastern North America during the early part of the winter season, but survival of these birds is not likely (Root 1988).

The Wood Thrush is accidental throughout the mid-west with records widely scattered from various States and Provinces (Evans *et al.* 2011).

Along the West Coast of North America, the Wood Thrush is an accidental vagrant species with only a small number of records. This species is accidental in Alaska with a recent photographed record from the Bering Sea on St Paul Island, on October 3, 2014 (Swick 2014). The Wood

Thrush is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with a recent record from the southern interior of the province in the fall of 2015 (T. Lowry Pers. Comm.). There are no accepted records for Washington State by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In Oregon, there are only three accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In California, the Wood Thrush is a very rare vagrant with twenty-eight accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014).

The Wood Thrush is an accidental vagrant to Europe with one record each for Iceland on October 23, 1967 and the Isles of Scilly, in Great Britain on October 7, 1987 with an historical nineteenth century record from the Azores (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Wood Thrush is covered in all standard North American Field Guides. This species is a medium-sized thrush that measures on average 20 cm and weighs 40–50 grams (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Evans *et al.* 2011). This makes the Wood Thrush smaller than an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) which measures 25 cm, but holds its posture the same as that of an American Robin (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In size and plumage the sexes of the Wood Thrush look very much alike. Identification is fairly straight-forward and should not present any lucky observer that may find this species in British Columbia any issues.

The adult birds are cinnamon-brown on the crown and nape, fading to olive-brown on the back, wings, and tail (Evans *et al.* 2011). The underparts are white with conspicuous large blackish spots on the breast, sides, and flanks (Sibley 2000). There is a dull white eye-ring (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is buff-coloured at the base, darkening to dark brown on the upper mandible and at the tip (Evans *et al.* 2011). The legs are pinkish (Sibley 2000). Most males have slightly longer wings and tail than females, but this feature has considerable overlap between the sexes (Evans *et al.* 2011).

Juvenile plumage is similar to that of the adult, but there are ochreous tawny streaks and spots on the back and neck (Evans *et al.* 2011). These spots are moulted early in the fall (Evans *et al.* 2011). There are buff spots on the wing coverts (Evans *et al.* 2011).

First winter plumage is similar to adult plumage, but normally shows at least some retained juvenile greater covert feathers with buffish-pale rufous, usually triangular markings, at the feather tips that are lacking on adult birds (Lewington *et al.* 1992). There are also newly moulted greater covert feathers that will clearly contrast with juvenile covert feathers (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

The Wood Thrush's song usually consists of a three-note whistle that is often preceded by a fainter, double hard note and followed by a fainter, slightly metallic trill (Lewington *et al.* 1992). This creates a "te-te-EE-O-LEHR-tirrr" (Lewington *et al.* 1992). The three-part song can be varied slightly from phrase to phrase. The alarm call is a distinct "uit-uit-uit-uit" (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

The Wood Thrush is very distinct, and not likely to be confused with other smaller "Catharus" Thrush species when seen well (Evans *et al.* 2011). Adults are distinguished from other North American thrushes by rusty heads and large blackish spots contrasting with white (not buffy) underparts (Evans *et al.* 2011). The Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) which is a casual species in British Columbia is superficially similar, but has a longer tail and longer decurved bill with black streaked (not spotted) underparts and a pale eye (Evans *et al.* 2011).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Wood Thrush is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with one recent record found in Summerland in the South Okanagan, by Tom Lowry (T. Lowry Pers. Comm.). The bird was photographed and enjoyed by many observers from all over the province from October 25-27, 2015 (T. Lowry Pers. Comm.). This record constitutes the first record for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The timing of this record fits perfectly with the fall pattern of vagrancy in California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The dates of records for the state in the fall migration have occurred between October 10 and November 25. The British Columbia record fits right into the middle of this time period. This species should be looked for in the late spring when eastern passerines are prone to overshoot and turn up in the west (Roberson 1980). There is a distinct pattern of vagrancy in California for this time period with the dates ranging from June 2 to 19 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The most likely places for future records are known passerine vagrant trap locations. Keen observers should watch for this species in the province as it is possible anywhere.



Figure 1: Record 1: Wood Thrush at Summerland in the South Okanagan, on October 26, 2015. Photo © Peter Candido.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Peter Candido for giving us permission to use his amazing picture of the Wood Thrush from Summerland. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law. These images are not to be retransmitted or used for any purpose without the expressed written consent of the photographer.

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