# Field Identification of *Hylocichla/Catharus* Thrushes

## *Part II: Veery and Swainson's Thrush*

THIS ARTICLE, PART II of a three-part series, treats the identification of two of the North American members of the genus *Catharus:* Veery *(Catharus fuscescens)* and Swainson's Thrush *(C. ustulatus).* Molt patterns and aging characters for this genus were presented in Part I, along with the field identification of Wood Thrush *(Hylocichla mustelina)* and Hermit Thrush *(C. guttatus).* Veery and Swainson's Thrush, although easy to separate in the East, are deceptively similar in the West, where "Russet-backed" Swainson's Thrushes are often misidentified as Veeries. Both species are similar to Gray-cheeked *(C. minimus)* and Bicknell's Thrushes *(C. bicknelli),* which will be discussed in Part III of this series. Furthermore, Swainson's Thrush is the most likely of the *Catharus* thrushes to be confused with Hermit Thrush, and this similarity may be the cause of over-reporting of Swainson's Thrushes wintering north of Mexico. Of the *Catharus,* only Hermit Thrush winters regularly in the U.S. and Canada. Wintering birds identified as anything other than Hermit Thrushes should be carefully documented.

HAROLD LINDSTROM

*The photograph at left shows the typical facial pattern and breast-spotting of a Veery. Note the distinctly buff background to the breast and throat. The face pattern, with a pale loral patch and a rear eye-crescent, is shared only with Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrushes. The warm, rufous-brown upperparts should quickly rule out those species. Also, note the stark contrast between the whitish flanks and the brown wings. This photo was taken on Long Island, New York, in May 1992.*

**DANIEL LANE * and ALVARO JARAMILLO†**

### Species Identification
*(Catharus fuscescens)*

Veery is a thrush of deciduous forest and riparian growth. East of the Rockies, Veery prefers to breed in the dense shrubbery and second-growth of swamps, bottomland, and riparian areas as well as shrubby, moist hillsides, and stands of Mountain Laurel *(Kalmia latifolia).* Farther north, in the southern regions of boreal forest, it is found in riparian willow *(Salix)* and alder *(Alnus)* thickets, but is not necessarily associated with water, occurring in Quaking Aspen *(Populus tremuloides)* stands as well (P. Burke, pers. comm.). In its Rocky Mountain breeding-range, Veery is restricted mostly to riparian growth, particularly in willow and Black Cottonwood *(Populus trichocarpa)* stands (Cannings et al. 1987). Of the five *Catharus,* the Veery is usually found at the lowest elevations, often with the Wood Thrush in the East, but the latter usually prefers more mature forest. In the southern Appalachians, the Veery often is the only *Catharus,* found there in higher-elevation habitat zones than it is encountered in farther north.

The breeding-range of Veery extends from British Columbia to Newfoundland, south in the Rockies to eastern Arizona (where rare, local, and irregular), to Maryland along the Atlantic Coast, and to Georgia in the Appalachians (see map). It is a long-distance migrant (April to May, August to October), wintering on the southeastern edge of Amazonian South America (J. V. Remsen, unpubl. data *contra* most published references). Veery is the earliest of the spotted thrushes to migrate south, leaving its breeding-grounds in August; peak numbers at Cape May, New Jersey, occur in early September (Sibley 1993), and on the Gulf Coast in late September (Lowery 1974, specimens in Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science [LSUMZ]).

Veery has four currently recognized subspecies: *C. f. fuscescens,* which breeds from western Ontario east to New Brunswick and south in the Appalachians to Georgia; *C. f. fuliginosus,* restricted to south-central Quebec, southern Newfoundland, and the Magdalen Islands; *C. f. salicicolus,* from British Columbia south to Arizona and east along the northern edge of the Great Plains (southern Canada and the Dakotas) to Ontario and northwestern Ohio; and *C. f. subpallidus,* in northern Washington, Idaho, and western Montana (AOU 1957, Burleigh and Duvall 1959, Mayr and Paynter 1964). Apparently, most individuals of all subspecies pass over Florida and the Gulf Coast during migrations (Phillips 1991).

*The breeding-range of Veery extends from British Columbia to Newfoundland, south in the Rockies to eastern Arizona (where it is rare, local, and irregular), to Maryland along the Atlantic Coast, and to Georgia in the Appalachians.*

*Definitive Basic Plumage (Plate A)*
*C. f. fuscescens.* The upperparts are

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AJ has recently had his guide to the New World blackbirds published (Princeton), and is currently working on a field guide to the birds of Chile.

KEVIN T. KARLSON

*In a typical view of an eastern Veery, the first tip-off may be the brightness and richness of rufous-brown on the upperparts. Additional characters to note are that the throat and breast are washed with buff and only lightly spotted and that the flanks, here clearly exposed, are not washed with grayish-brown. Instead, the flanks are largely whitish or whitish-gray, contrasting strongly with the brown wing. Finally, the face pattern is fairly weak, with no well-defined spectacles or complete eye-ring. This photo was taken on the Dry Tortugas, Florida, in April 1999.*

ANTHONY MERCIECA

*The back of this adult Veery does not appear as bright and rich rufous as in some of the other photos presented here. This effect may be due to the lighting, or this individual may be near the darker extreme of eastern Veery or may represent a paler member of the subspecies* salicicolus. *Still, the contrast between the flank and wing and the reduced spotting clearly identify this bird as a Veery. Also note the lack of a distinctive eye-ring or spectacles, which results in a fairly blank facial expression. This photo was taken in Ontario in June 1991.*

a bright tawny-brown. On the underparts, the throat, cheek, and breast are washed with rich buff, often sharply cut off from the white belly, creating a "bibbed" effect. The malar streak and breast-spotting are weak and brown, sometimes almost lacking. On the face a noticeable eye-ring is lacking; the lores and post-ocular spot or crescent are pale buff or gray. The flanks are washed pale gray, contrasting strongly with the wing.

*C. f. salicicolus, C. f. fuliginosus, and C. f. subpallidus.* Most individuals of these subspecies are identical to nominate fuscescens, but there are darker individuals which can be duller brown in color (Plate A). The malar streak and breast-spotting are darker brown and stronger than in fuscescens. Also, the breast-spotting can be more extensive. The lores are whitish-buff or grayish-buff and contrast more strongly with the remainder of the head than in fuscescens. The flanks are gray, contrasting strongly with the wing.

### *Juvenal plumage (Plate A)*

The upperparts are a cooler brown than in definitive basic plumage, and are heavily spotted with fine buff. The underparts are more heavily spotted and barred with dark brown to gray than in definitive basic plumage, but less so than in the juvenal plumage of other *Catharus*.

### *First Basic Plumage (Plate A)*

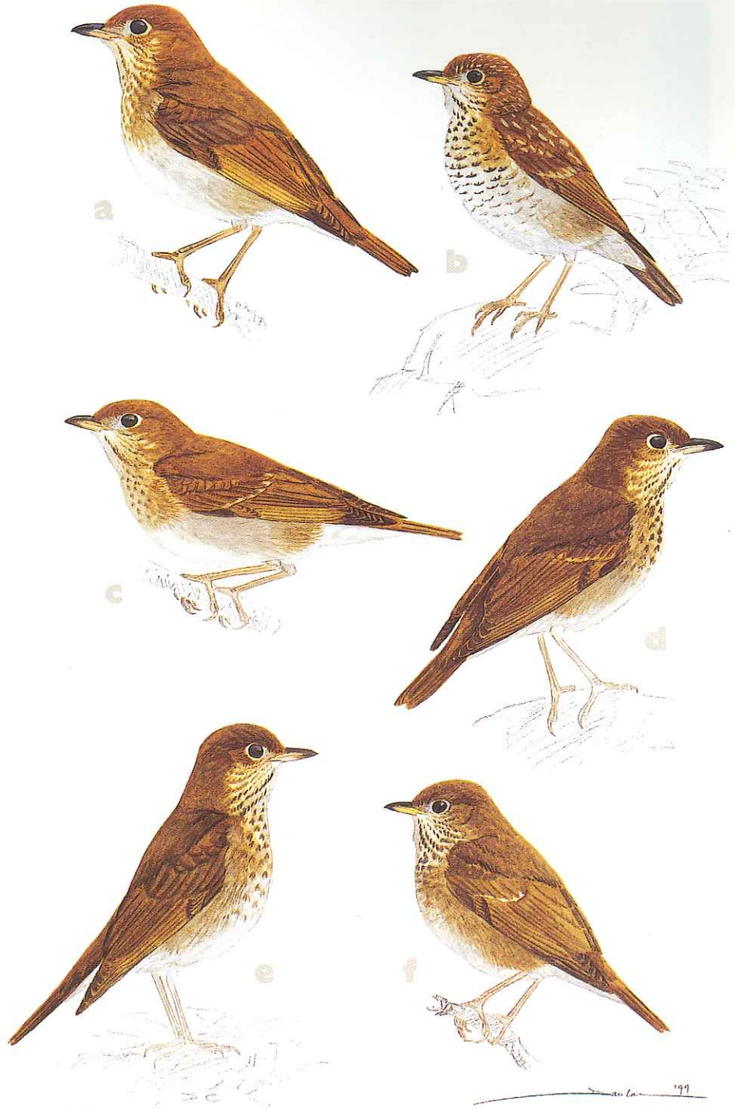
With a very close view, Veery in first basic plumage exhibits richer cinnamon-buff-colored markings on the tips of the greater coverts than do the other *Catharus*, and it occasionally also shows buff shaft-streaks on the median coverts. These markings may result in less contrast between the bases of the greater-wing-covert feathers and their tips in comparison with other members of the genus.

### *Similar Species*

Typical Veeries are fairly easily separated from the other *Catharus* by their entirely bright tawny upperparts. The eastern subspecies of the other four *Catharus* are dull brown or olive-brown on the head and back. If seen poorly, however, even a *swainsoni* Swainson's Thrush can appear to be reddish-brown under some lighting situations.

Normally, Veery's breast-spotting is weak compared to that of other *Catharus* and does not extend far onto the breast (see Plate A). Its buffy or gray lores and post-ocular crescent give Veery a characteristic facial expression, similar only to the facial markings of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrushes (hereafter, these latter two species will be referred to as the "gray-cheeked thrushes"). Differences in breast-spotting (Plate A in Part I) and the duller brown of the upperparts should further distinguish the gray-cheeked thrushes from a typical Veery, but in poor-light situations even a Veery's brighter tawny-brown upperparts can appear dull and dark.

Three other subspecies of the Veery—*C. f. salicicolus, C. f. fuliginosus,* and *C. f. subpallidus*—complicate separation from other *Catharus,* particularly gray-cheeked and "Russet-backed" Swainson's thrushes. These three




DANIEL LANE

*Plate A. Veery*

a. *Definitive basic* fuscescens *Veery. Some birds may have even less extensive spotting.*
b. *Juvenal* fuscescens *Veery.*
c. *First basic* fuscescens *Veery.*
d. *First basic* salicicolus *Veery (subspecies* fuliginosus *and* subpallidus *similar). This individual is at the dark extreme of variation within the "dark Veeries," and can be easily confused with Bicknell's Thrush (see f). Confusion with Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's thrushes is probably underestimated by most birders.*
e. *Definitive basic* salicicolus *Veery (subspecies* fuliginosus *and* subpallidus *similar). This is another dark-plumaged individual, but many can be indistinguishable from* fuscescens *(see a).*
f. *First basic Bicknell's Thrush. Similar facial pattern and back colors to dark Veeries makes separation difficult (see d). Note browner flanks, shape of breast spots, and yellower base to lower mandible. Also, note the whitish-buff tips to greater wing-coverts; these are typical of Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes in first basic plumage; Veeries usually have more cinnamon covert tips.*

# thrush ID: veery and swainson's thrush

ALAN MURPHY

*Notice the extensive grayish wash to the face and darker rufous-brown upperparts of this adult Veery, suggesting a member of subspecies* salicicolus *or* subpallidus. *While the generally warm colors of this bird would likely rule out Gray-cheeked Thrush or Bicknell's Thrush in most viewers' minds, some confusion may still occur. Note the weak spotting on the breast and the pale whitish-gray flanks contrasting strongly with the wing. The bird was photographed on South Padre Island, Texas, in April 1998.*

RUTH SULLIVAN

*This individual, based on the locality and date (photographed in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, in June 1999), belongs to race* salicicolus *or* subpallidus, *the western Veery. Whereas western Veeries are typically darker than eastern Veeries, many individuals, such as this one, cannot be separated safely by plumage. The brighter, more rufous appearance of this individual also may be partly due to plumage wear and fading, as birds molt their plumage only once a year, in late summer. Thus, spotted thrushes will be at their most worn and faded in the early and mid-summer.*

subspecies include more darkly plumaged individuals than are found in nominate *fuscescens,* but most individuals are equally as tawny as that subspecies. The breasts of darker individuals tend to be less buffy and more heavily and darkly spotted than in nominate *fuscescens*. The Newfoundland subspecies, *fuliginosus,* which migrates along the East and Gulf Coasts, is particularly likely to be confused with gray-cheeked thrushes. Indeed, many early-spring reports of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's thrushes may refer to *fuliginosus* or *salicicolus* Veeries. As Dunn and Garrett (1983b) suggested, the similarities among these species are striking and may be largely unrecognized by most birders.

The lores and post-ocular spot of dark Veeries range from buffy to grayish and can match those of Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes almost perfectly. Without seeing the breast of such a bird, it may not be possible to identify it positively to species. In such cases, any call-notes or songs given will assist in identification. Should the bird give a frontal view, the extent, shape, and intensity of the breast spots should clinch the bird's identity.

The spotting underneath differs noticeably between Veery and gray-cheeked thrushes (Plate A in Part I). In the latter, the breast spots are more distinct and horizontally rectangular in shape, giving the breast a barred appearance. The spots of a dark Veery are less distinct by comparison, shaped more like blurry teardrops, and are not as extensive (see Plate A). The malar stripe tends to be darker and more apparent in gray-cheeked thrushes than in Veery. Flank color is also useful for separating gray-cheeked from dark Veeries: it is grayish-brown in the former and pale gray in the latter, so that the flanks do not contrast as strongly with the wing in the gray-cheeked thrushes. Both Veery and the gray-cheeked thrushes (especially Bicknell's) typically



ALVARO JARAMILLO

*This bird may be a bit of a shocker to some readers, but it is a Veery. Photographed in British Columbia in August 1994, it is in extremely fresh plumage, and as such is probably as rich in color saturation as it will be all year. A western Veery of the subspecies* salicicolus *can be nearly as dark brown as Bicknell's Thrush or Gray-cheeked Thrush, and confusion is understandable. Look especially at the shape and color of the breast spotting (blurrier and browner in Veery, cleaner and blacker in "gray-cheeked" thrushes), and the flank/wing contrast (whitish-gray against brown in Veery, less striking brownish-gray against brown in "gray-cheeked" thrushes). Another character to notice is the color of the lower mandible: this should be studied very carefully under excellent light and at close range. A Veery will have a pinkish base to its lower mandible, whereas a "gray-cheeked" thrush will have a yellowish base to its bill. This can be a very tricky identification, and dark Veeries can occur over a wide geographic range, so beware!*

have a buff wash on the throat and breast, but this wash is usually much stronger in Veery.

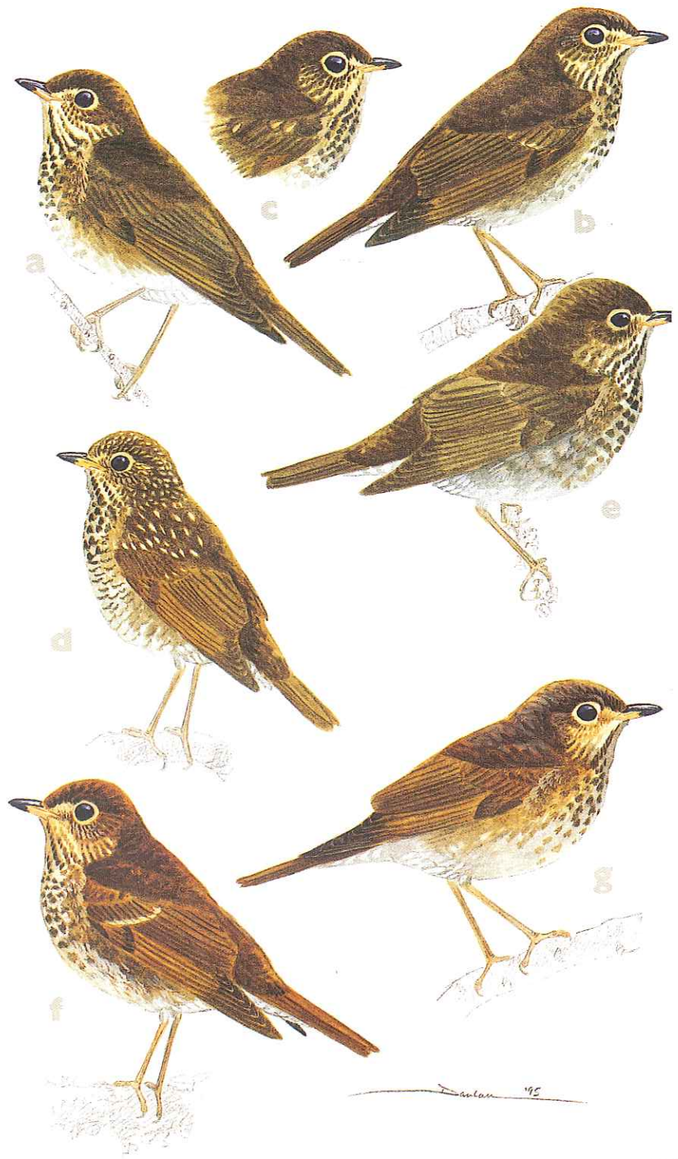
Veeries are often confused with "Russet-backed" Swainson's Thrushes (from the Pacific Coast) because of the similar upperpart colors. Both can be uniform dull reddish-brown or russet from the crown to the tail. Again, the Veery tends to have fewer, weaker breast spots than Swainson's Thrush, but there is some overlap in this character. The key difference is the face: Swainson's Thrush has a bold buff eye-ring and supraloral area immediately above the lores that contrasts with the dark lores (resulting in characteristic spectacles), unlike the more indistinct buffy or pale-gray loral patch of Veery. Also, the flank coloring of the two species differs: that of Veery is grayish, whereas Swainson's is washed with buffy-brown (Dunn and Garrett 1983b), resulting in stronger flank/wing contrast in Veery than in Swainson's. In the "Olive-backed" subspecies *almae* of Swainson's Thrush, the flanks are grayer than those of other subspecies of Swainson's Thrush, but that race is obviously duller olive-brown above than any Veery.

Hermit Thrush is rather easily separated from all subspecies of Veery by the former's rump/tail contrast, by its (usually) more prominent eye-ring (more closely resembling that of a Swainson's Thrush), and its whiter breast with larger, more contrasting, blackish spotting.

## Vocalizations

The song of Veery, and the source of its name, is a downward-spiraling series of *veer* notes: *VEER-EER, veer-eer.* The quality of the song is very ethereal and quite musical, and is most similar to those of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrushes. These latter two species, however, have a rising phrase or two in their songs.

The most typical call of Veery is a clear, descending, whistled *pheeu*. It also gives a mewed or more growled *eew.* These calls bear some similarity to the calls of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrushes, but again, the latter two species' call-notes have a rising component. Another call-type of Veery, also the nocturnal flight call (Evans 1990), is a hoarse, quiet *veer-y,* normally two-syllabled compared to Wood Thrush's monosyllabic *heer,* but sometimes monosyllabic (Evans 1990); Veery's call usually sounds sweeter and less hoarse. When disturbed in the vicinity of the nest, or when fending off other Veeries intruding on a territory, Veery may give a very high, descending, whistled *seeeeee,* very like that of the American Robin and similar calls of the other *Catharus* (D. Sibley, pers. comm.; D. Lane, pers. obs.). Veeries also produce a sharp, nasal chatter *che-che-che-che,* rapidly uttered, often as a prelude to full song. This chatter is given during aggressive encounters (W. Ellison, pers. comm.).



DANIEL LANE

*Plate B. Swainson's Thrush*

*a Definitive basic* swainsoni *Swainson's Thrush.*
*b. First basic* swainsoni *Swainson's Thrush. This individual shows pale shaft streaks on the median wing coverts, a feature often seen in this species (particularly in autumn). The markings on the greater wing coverts of this individual are reduced to one pale shaft streak on the innermost covert feather.*
*c. First basic* swainsoni *Swainson's Thrush.*
*d. Juvenal* almae *Swainson's Thrush.*
*e. Definitive basic* almae *Swainson's Thrush.*
*f. First basic* ustulatus *Swainson's Thrush.*
*g. Definitive basic* oedicus *Swainson's Thrush. Some individuals show less pronounced "spectacles" than this individual.*

## Species Identification
## Swainson's Thrush
*(Catharus ustulatus)*

A thrush of mainly northern and montane forests, Swainson's Thrush breeds from Alaska across Canada to Newfoundland, and south along the Pacific coastal slope to southern California, in the Rockies to central Arizona and northern New Mexico, and in the Appalachians to Virginia (see Map 2) (AOU 1983, 1998). In the coniferous forests and the mountainous areas of the North and East, Swainson's Thrush is found in mixed, mature boreal forest with dense understory and also breeds in regenerating second-growth coniferous forest (R. Dawson, pers. comm.). In eastern mountains, it breeds at elevations between those frequented by Bicknell's and Hermit Thrushes (but overlaps with both); in western mountains, it occurs mostly below elevations frequented by Hermit Thrushes. In boreal forest, Swainson's, Hermit, and Gray-cheeked Thrushes can occur together. In western mountains, Swainson's Thrushes are present in riparian and mixed habitats, preferring dense groves of willow and alder (Cannings et al. 1987). Along the Pacific Coast, "Russet-backed" Swainson's Thrushes breed commonly in mixed forests, deciduous second-growth, and riparian areas down to sea-level.

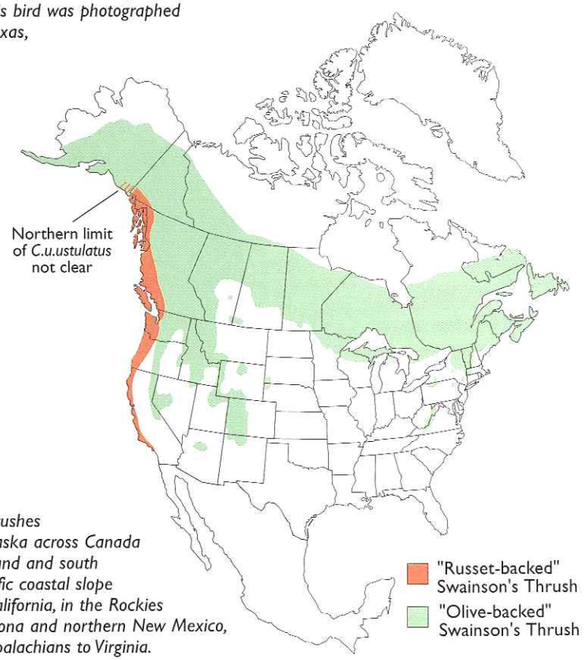
Like Gray-cheeked Thrush, Swainson's Thrush is a long-distance migrant (April to early June, late August to mid-October, November on Gulf Coast), wintering along both slopes of northern Mexico south to western Panama (Russet-backed group); and from eastern Panama south to Bolivia and northwestern Argentina (Olive-backed group) east of the Andes (AOU 1983, 1998, Ridgely and Tudor 1989, Phillips 1991).

Swainson's Thrush consists of two rather distinctive subspecies groups, formerly called "Olive-backed" and "Russet-backed" Thrushes (map); we will refer to the two groups by these names hereafter. The Olive-backed group is the more widespread and consists of three currently recognized subspecies: *C. u. almae* (southeastern Alaska and Yukon south to California and New Mexico), *C. u. swainsoni* (northeastern British Columbia to Labrador and south to Michigan and Vermont, locally in the Appalachians to Virginia), and *C. u. clarescens* (Newfoundland and Nova Scotia). The Russet-backed group consists of two subspecies, both largely restricted to the Pacific slope: *C. u. ustulatus* (found from southeastern Alaska south to Oregon, west of the Cascades), and *C. u. oedicus* (northern Washington south through Oregon, along the east slope of the Cascades, south to coastal southern California) (Mayr and Paynter 1964). The plumage and morphological differences between Olive-backed and Russet-backed Swainson's Thrushes are as great as or greater than those between Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrushes.

*Definitive Basic Plumage (Plate B) Olive-backed Group.* The upperparts are olive-brown. Bold, buff spectacles contrast strongly with the face. The throat and breast are strongly washed buff, and the

BRIAN E. SMALL

*Here is an excellent view of a typical "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrush. The first thing to notice is the distinctive spectacle on the face, a facial pattern quite unlike that of any of the other spotted thrushes. Other characters to note are the strong buff wash to the face and throat, the heavy spotting on the breast, and the dull olive-brown upperparts. This particular individual has only lightly gray-brown washed flanks, and thus shows stronger flank/wing contrast than do most. This bird was photographed at High Island, Texas, in May 1998.*



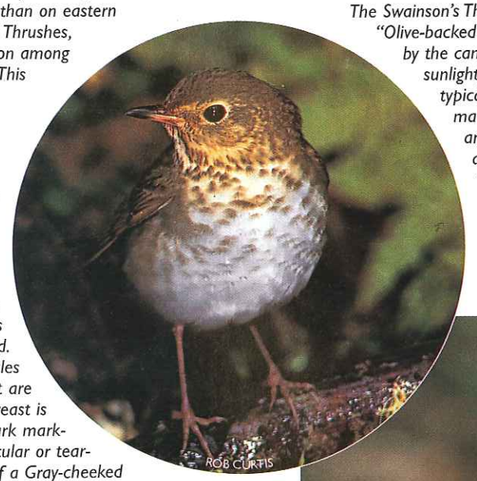

*Swainson's Thrushes breed from Alaska across Canada to Newfoundland and south along the Pacific coastal slope to southern California, in the Rockies to central Arizona and northern New Mexico, and in the Appalachians to Virginia.*

RICK AND NORA BOWERS

*This adult Swainson's Thrush appears very dull olive-brown above. This appearance, and the location of the photo, would suggest that this bird is of the race* almae, *the westernmost of the "Olive-backed" group. Notice the strong spectacles, the heavy spotting on the breast, and the reduced flank/wing contrast (due to the heavy wash of grayish-brown on the flank). The buff wash to the breast seems paler than on eastern "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrushes, but this paleness is common among individuals of race* almae. *This photo was taken in Pima County, Arizona, in October 1994.*

ARTHUR MORRIS/BIRDS AS ART

*The Swainson's Thrush above appears warmer brown than most "Olive-backed" thrushes, but this is probably caused by the camera flash (and can also be seen under bright sunlight). Otherwise, the bird exhibits all the characters typical of "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrush: the well-marked buff spectacles, the buff-washed throat and breast with extensive dark spots, and the lack of obviously contrasting rufous hues to the rump, tail, or primary bases. One cannot judge the flank/wing contrast with this bird because the wings are drooped, covering the flanks. This photo was taken at Crane Creek, Ohio, in May 1998.*



ROB CURTIS

*Photographed at High Island, Texas, in May 1997, this Swainson's Thrush, clearly demonstrates the typical face and breast patterns of an "Olive-backed" bird. The distinct spectacles and throat and breast are washed with buff. The breast is densely spotted with dark markings that are more circular or tear-drop-shaped than those of a Gray-cheeked Thrush or a Bicknell's Thrush, but weaker and smaller than on a Hermit Thrush. Also note that the flanks (visible just under the wing) are washed with grayish-brown, reducing contrast with the brown wing. This individual also demonstrates the fairly short, blunt bill with a pink base to the lower mandible typical of "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrushes.*

*With olive-brown upperparts, distinctive, buffy spectacles, and extensive spotting on the breast, we can be quite confident in identifying this individual at right as an "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrush. Note the very long primaries. Olive-backed Swainson's Thrushes winter in South America, and need more wing area to complete the migration from there to North America. The wings of the bird pictured are slightly drooped, covering the flanks somewhat, but the grayish-brown wash of the flanks can just be seen a little above and behind the leg. This photo was taken at High Island, Texas, in April 1998.*

ROB CURTIS



malar streak and extensive breast-spotting are blackish. The flanks are buffy-olive and do not contrast strongly with the wings. On some individuals, the buff on the throat can be pale enough to be almost lacking. A whitish throat and breast are especially common in *C. u. almae*. Also, *almae* is grayer than *swainsoni*, particularly on the flanks and primary bases. Swainson's Thrushes have proportionately short bills, making their head appear larger and more rounded (W. Ellison, pers. comm.).

*Russet-backed Group*. The upperparts are medium- to russet-brown and normally warmer than in Olive-backed Thrush. The buff spectacles are bold, but typically thinner and not so contrasting with the face as in Olive-backed Thrush (Dunn and Garrett 1983a). The throat and breast are strongly washed buff, and the malar streak and breast-spotting are browner and more diffuse than in Olive-backed Thrush. The flanks are buffy and do not contrast strongly with the wings. The russet color is especially bright on the folded greater primary coverts and primary bases, as well as on the tail. *C. u. oedicus* differs from the more northern ustulatus by having a slightly duller brown back, but shares the russet tail and rump. In oedicus, the lores and cheeks may be as buffy as the supraloral area and eye-ring, weakening the spectacled effect.

BRIAN E. SMALL

*While perhaps a little washed out by a strong flash, this Swainson's Thrush appears to represent the pale extreme of the Pacific Coast "Russet-backed" Thrush group. Note its very warm brown upperparts, weaker facial pattern than most "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrushes, and very buff wash to the face and breast with less spotting. Nevertheless, a buffy spectacle is still present, and a brownish wash is evident on the flank (resulting in reduced flank/wing contrast), ruling out a Veery. This bird was photographed in Riverside County, California, in April 1995.*

ALAN MURPHY

*This photo of an "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrush provides us with a great view of the bird's breast-spotting, which is fairly extensive, and a look at the poor contrast between the flank and the wing. The bird was photographed at High Island, Texas, in May 1997.*

*Juvenal Plumage (Plate B)*

The background color of the upperparts is as in definitive basic plumage, but the upperparts are boldly spotted buff or whitish. The underparts are extensively spotted. The same face-pattern described for the definitive and first basic plumages should be apparent in this plumage as well. This plumage is very similar to that of juvenal plumaged Gray-cheeked and Hermit Thrushes; some individuals may even have contrast between the olive-brown back and the more reddish-brown primaries and tail.

*First Basic Plumage (Plate B)*

As in the corresponding plumage of Gray-cheeked Thrush, the first basic plumage of Swainson's has pale buff tips on the greater wing-coverts that contrast strongly with the remainder of the wing. Often (particularly in autumn?), the median coverts have bold, buff shaft-streaks.

*Similar Species*

"Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrush differs from the gray-cheeked thrushes by having a buffy supraloral area and eye-ring that give the appearance of spectacles and that contrast strongly against the lores and cheek. Olive-backed Thrush also tends to have a stronger buff wash on the throat and breast. The spots on the breast of Olive-backed Thrush are more teardrop-shaped or rounded than those of the gray-cheeked thrushes, which appear more horizontally rectangular or oval (Plate A in Part I).

Russet-backed Thrush has russet-brown upperparts and a strong buff wash to the throat and breast. Its breast-spotting tends to be more diffuse than that of Olive-backed Thrush and thus may approach Veery more closely. Russet-backed Thrushes especially resemble Veeries in back color, face-pattern, and breast-pattern, often leading to misidentifications by unwary birders in the Pacific states and in the Southwest. The most useful characters for separation are Swainson's buffy spectacles and browner flanks resulting in reduced flank/wing contrast (Roberson 1980, Dunn and Garrett 1983). Veeries have grayer lores and more weakly defined eye-rings (usually confined to a spot or crescent behind the eye), unlike the buff spectacles of Swainson's Thrush. Veeries also have a consistently whiter belly than Russet-backed Thrushes (D. Sibley, pers. comm.).

Swainson's Thrush differs from Hermit Thrush by its lack of strong back/rump contrast, being a monotone russet-brown or olive-brown color from head to tail. Olive-backed Thrushes are more olive-brown above and buffier below than are most Hermit Thrushes, and they have a wider, buffier eye-ring that is nearly always complete. Russet-backed Thrushes are warmer brown overall than are most Hermits, except perhaps *faxoni*,

BRIAN E. SMALL

*Compared to the individual on page 251 (top right photo), this is a much more boldly-marked individual of the "Russet-backed" group of Swainson's Thrush. The upperparts are rather warm brown, the face-pattern is not quite as distinct as that of a typical "Olive-backed" Swainson's Thrush (but still exhibits a spectacled appearance), the breast-spotting is browner (and quite extensive in this individual), and the flanks are broadly washed with brown, hardly contrasting with the wings. The bird was photographed in Riverside County, California, in May 1996.*



and they have a stronger buff wash to the face and breast. Also, Swainson's Thrushes rarely cock their tails when disturbed as do Hermit Thrushes. In the West, Hermit Thrushes are often misidentified as Swainson's Thrushes, and Russet-backed Swainson's Thrushes are often misidentified as Veeries, particularly by birders experienced only with eastern birds. More careful attention must be paid to the facial pattern than to the color or tone of brown on the upperparts.

*Vocalizations*

The song of Swainson's Thrush is rather distinctive: a rising, spiraling series of rich, warbling, fluty notes that fades toward the end: *whurzel werzel weezel weezel ezee zee?* Several song phrases are often given in succession, shifting among three or four starting pitches.

Songs of Veery and Swainson's Thrush can sound similar, if you are not paying sufficient attention. The quality and frequency of both songs is similar. The big difference is that Veery descends and Swainson's Thrush ascends.

Swainson's has a variety of call-notes, the most common being a quiet, liquid *wick* or *pwip*, resembling the sound of dripping water. A second call-type, infrequently heard, is a somewhat purring, rising *greee* similar to the chatter of a Red Squirrel *(Tamiasciurus hudsonicus)*, and sometimes a two-syllabled *hic-whirr* (W. Ellison, pers. comm.). A third call-type of Swainson's Thrush, also the nocturnal flight-call (Evans 1990), is a rising, high, pure whistled *heep* or *eee?*, similar to the call of the Spring Peeper frog *(Pseudacris crucifer)*. Occasionally, the nocturnal flight-call can be somewhat burry, resembling the nocturnal flight-call of Veery more closely (M. O'Brien, pers. comm.). Vocalizations differ somewhat between russet-backed and olive-backed subspecies of Swainson's Thrush, but comparative studies are needed (D. Sibley, pers. comm.).

LARRY SANSONE

*While this is a duller example of a "Russet-backed" Swainson's Thrush, this individual, photographed in Riverside County, California, in May 1999, still appears quite warm brown on the upperparts, particularly its primaries and tail. It also shows a spectacled face-pattern and buffy face and breast with a moderate amount of spotting. Finally, the flanks have a brownish-gray wash to them, creating a weak flank/wing contrast.*

## Conclusion

Veery and Swainson's Thrush can both be confused with Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrushes, and these four species present an identification challenge for North American birders. While most birds will be identifiable as one species or another, there are birds which will not permit a good look, or will have intermediate characters. We hope that the information presented in this series of articles will help to keep these odd individuals to a minimum, but not all birds can be satisfactorily identified even with excellent looks. In Part III, one of the most difficult identification complexes in North America, that of Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes, will be addressed.

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