

A Mid-summer Record of a Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) in Sacramento County

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Over the past twelve years one of us (SW) has banded over 20,000 birds on the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) near Elk Grove, Sacramento County. On very rare occasions an unexpected species has found its way into the nets. One such event occurred on 10 July 2008, when a Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) was captured at a site called the Keyhole, less than a mile north of North Stone Lake.

SW opened ten, 12-m mist nets at 0600 and found the thrasher low in one of the nets on his first net run at 0630. The net was placed in the shadow of a large, fruiting Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*), to which the bird appeared to be headed when it flew into the net. SW was initially struck by the rufous color of the wings and tail and bright yellow eye but, to be honest, was not sure what he had. He thought it was a thrasher, but it was not a species with which he was familiar. He quickly returned to the field station, where field guide comparisons indicated the bird was a Brown Thrasher. The rest of the banding team (Miriam LeGare, Anne Pellegrini, Mary Schiedt, and Meaghan Sullivan) soon arrived to confirm the identification. Pellegrini and Sullivan, in particular, had lived in the eastern U. S. and were familiar with the species. SW contacted Chris Conard, working nearby, who rushed over to view the bird. Both Conard and SW photographed the thrasher in the hand (Figure 1). After the bird was banded and processed it was released and flew quickly into a tall stand of willows. The following morning a number of observers heard, but did not see, the bird singing at first light in response to a taped recording of Brown Thrasher vocalizations. It was not seen or heard on subsequent visits to the site.

DESCRIPTION: A large, slim passerine with a long tail; overall body length was 285 mm. The upper parts, including the wings and tail, were bright rufous (grayer on the face). The wings were highlighted with a pair of distinctive wing bars of black with white tips. Wing chord measured 110 mm, and primary extension (longest primary minus longest secondary) measured 18 mm. Length of longest tail feather was 138 mm. There were indistinct, paler tips to the two outermost rectrices on either side of the tail. Background color of the chin, throat, breast, belly and flanks was a dull white. The breast, sides, flanks and belly were heavily streaked with black (brown on the sides of the breast). The undertail coverts were buff-colored and unstreaked. The irides were bright yellow. The fairly long, slim bill (exposed culmen length = 23 mm) was slightly decurved, the maxilla slate gray and the mandible extensively pale,

yellow-buff basally with some gray along the cutting edges and at the tip. The legs were gray-brown (tarsus = 37 mm).

The bird weighed 71.4 g. Inspection of the furcular hollow revealed that it was half full of fat. Lack of a cloacal protuberance or brood patch made it impossible to determine the bird's sex. Flight feather wear was heavy; feathers were worn and frayed with some tips missing. There was no evidence of molt in process, but molt limits were evident, and the retention of some older wing coverts contrasting with fresher, apparently newer coverts indicated that the bird was likely in its second year. The skull was fully ossified.

The only other North American thrasher likely to be confused with Brown Thrasher is the Long-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma longirostre*). The latter species, which is non-migratory and has a relatively limited range in southern Texas and eastern Mexico, is unrecorded from California and unlikely to be found in the state, but it has wandered north to New Mexico and Colorado on a number of occasions and so must be considered a possibility here (California Bird Records Committee 2007). In any event, Long-billed Thrasher is easily eliminated in this case by a number of features, including the bill length (too short) and color (extensive buff-yellow color on the mandible), primary extension (too long), and unstreaked, buff undertail coverts (Pyle 1997). The tail length of the Stone Lakes bird falls within the range of the western subspecies of Brown Thrasher (*T. r. longicauda*) and outside the range of the eastern subspecies (*T. r. rufum*) (Pyle 1997). Unitt (1984) noted that all California specimens of Brown Thrasher identified to subspecies were of *T. r. longicauda*.

The Brown Thrasher breeds from central Alberta east to New Brunswick and south — east of the Rocky Mountains — to Texas and Florida. It is largely migratory, most of the population in the northern half of the range moving south to winter in the southeastern U. S. It is considered a very rare but regular migrant in California, occasionally found wintering (Roberson, 1980, California Bird Records Committee 2007). Most of the reports of migrants in spring and fall come from desert oases and coastal “vagrant traps” (Roberson 1980). The ranges of dates for 23 records of migrants on Southeast Farallon Island (SFI) as of 1999 are indicative of the periods most birds are encountered in the state as a whole: From 1 May to 2 July in spring (9 birds) and from 22 September to 10 November in fall (14 records; Richardson et al. 2003). Of 84 California records evaluated by Roberson (1980), only 15% were from the winter months.

There are only about 12 published reports of Brown Thrasher for the Central Valley (CV), but the seasonal pattern of occurrence is different from the pattern for California in general in that most CV reports are of wintering birds or birds encountered in late fall or winter (Table 1). There may be behavioral reasons for this difference. The Brown Thrasher is a notorious skulker, and individuals may be particularly furtive when on migration, more

Table 1. Central Valley records of Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*).

LOCATION	DATE	SOURCE
Lodi, San Joaquin Co.	27 Nov. 1953-9 Jan. 1954	Johnston 1964
Solano Co. Park, Solano Co.	13-19 Nov. 1974	McCaskie et al. 1979
Hart Park, Bakersfield, Kern Co.	17 Nov. 1984-26 Jan. 1985	McCaskie 1985
Lost Lake, Fresno Co.	28 Dec. 1984	Christmas Bird Count data base+
Tuolumne River Reg. Park, Stanislaus Co.	24 Oct.-1 Dec. 1985	Campbell et al. 1986
Chico, Butte Co.	12 Dec. 1987-4 Apr. 1988	Snowden 2001
Crosby-Herold Rd, near Lincoln, Placer Co.	17 Dec. 1994-16 Jan. 1995; returning 15 Dec. 1995- 17 Feb. 1996	Manolis 2001
(East Sacramento, Sacramento Co.)	(17 Nov. 1996)	Manolis 2001*
NE of Fresno, Fresno Co.	mid-Dec. 1998-Mar. 1999	Terrill et al. 1999
Woodbridge Reg. Park. Lodi, San Joaquin Co.	31 Oct. 2003-16 Apr. 2004	Sterling 2004
Porterville, Tulare Co.	14-16 Apr. 2006	Sterling 2006
Cosumnes River Preserve, Sacramento Co.	2-5 Jan. 2007#	Sterling 2007
Stone Lakes NWR, Sacramento Co.	10-11 Jul. 2008	This paper

+ <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/hr/>

* Record not accepted by the Sacramento Bird Records Committee.

Heard only.

so than when on a summer or winter territory. As such, they may be more obvious to observers at relatively small and isolated patches of suitable habitat along the coast and in the deserts. In winter, however, the Brown Thrasher is more frequently encountered in residential areas, often at bird feeding stations (Roberson 1980). Wintering birds may be less furtive than migrants as they become accustomed to their environment. A bird visiting the same haunts, such as feeding stations, over a period of weeks or months is surely more likely to be discovered by birders than is a constantly moving and skulking migrant.

A mid-summer bird such as the one banded at Stone Lakes NWR, however, is much less easily explained. There are very few records of Brown Thrasher in California for July. The first report was of one banded on SFI on 2 July 1969 (DeSante and Ainley 1980). In addition, there are four additional reports for the month, all from Humboldt County: Espa Lagoon, 2 July 1981; Eureka, 1 July 1988; Lamphere Dunes, 11 July 1988; and Lamphere Dunes, 24 July 1995 (Harris 2005). These records, at least those from the beginning of the month and particularly the one from SFI, might be best explained as involving (very!) late spring migrants. There are two records of extended stays by individual Brown Thrashers at locations within the state in the period from late July into August or September: A bird in Carmel, Monterey County, from 24 July through 9 September 1981, described as the “first summering record for California” (Roberson 1980); and one at Crescent City, Del Norte County, from 27 July through 11 August 2002 (Harris 2002). These sedentary birds were probably molting, as the typical period of prebasic molt for after-hatching-year birds is in July and August (Pyle 1997). Given the time of year and its general behavior and physiological condition (e. g., not yet undergoing prebasic molt), the Stone Lakes thrasher is probably best considered a “floater” (Brown 1969), an evocative term coined to describe somewhat peripatetic, non-breeding individuals during the breeding season.

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Figure 1. Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) banded at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento County, California, on 10 July 2008.

Photo by Stan Wright