

First record of Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) for the Central Valley

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After dropping my daughters off at their respective schools on the morning of 7 June 1996, I drove from Sacramento to the Nature Conservancy's Cosumnes River Preserve in south Sacramento County. It has been my pleasure to conduct bird surveys in the Tall Forest section of the preserve for the past few years. This plum parcel along the north bank of the Cosumnes River is approximately 88 ha of riparian forest dominated by valley oaks. It is not virgin woodland, having been cleared in the 1890s, but it was fenced and ungrazed subsequent to timber harvesting, and tall trees and a rich layer of understory vegetation have since grown there. Unlike some other parts of the preserve, the Tall Forest is not ordinarily open to the public except during once-a-month bird walks.

I had earlier heard the pleasant strains of a late Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) along Wood Duck Slough, the west bank of which bears the trail leading to the Tall Forest. After crossing into the forest I detoured off the main path to a spot with several shallow pools, the last, fast-disappearing remnants of unusually late spring floods. Under a nearly closed canopy forest with well-developed understory vegetation and yet-to-be fully leafed-out ground cover, I heard unusually tentative notes of a bird that I had last regularly heard when I lived in Maryland many years before. Despite their uncharacteristic delivery, the notes were unmistakable, and I almost immediately knew that I was listening to a Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*).

After prolonged scrutiny of the immediate area, I secured one fair view of the bird, visually confirming its identity. I then rather rapidly completed my loop through the forest and returned home to make phone calls. That evening I returned to the forest with Laurie Langham and David Yee who, though they never saw the bird perched, were able to confirm the identification when the bird broke into its ethereal song as the sun neared setting.

The next morning before sunrise I returned to the area with my daughter Renee Trochet, Ed Greaves, and equipment to record the bird if it was still present and singing. From perhaps 150 m away we could hear the bird in full, glorious song! We carefully tracked its movements while I made recordings. Ed had one brief look, I another. By about 0618 the bird fell silent and we could no longer track it, but by then I had recorded about 5 minutes of song.

On the evening of 9 June I played the recording in hopes of eliciting song for the benefit of a small party of observers. Back and forth came song phrases, first from the bird and then from the tape recorder. It soon struck me that an extended series of phrases I had recorded the previous morning was faithfully repeating, phrase-by-phrase, the bird's vocalizations. I possessed an echo box!

Mike Lynn, an intern for Point Reyes Bird Observatory surveying the breeding birds of the Tall Forest, was the last person to hear the Wood Thrush. On the evening of 10 June he heard it about 200 m south of where it had been previously. I was unable to find it the next morning. About 18 people heard the bird during its stay at the preserve. So far as I know, only Ed Greaves and I had reasonable looks of the bird perched. Several others saw it in brief flights from one high, concealed perch to another. A description, summarized from notes, is as follows:

Overall shape and relative size: Rather robust body, size between *Catharus* and *Turdus*, relatively long wing and short tail. **Bill:** Medium size, straight with slight curvature of culmen, fairly broad-based; in silhouette, appeared uniformly dark. **Head:** Large, dark eye surrounded by very conspicuous white eye-ring and bright rusty crown and nape; remainder of face appeared grayish except for white over black malar lines; lores slightly paler gray, throat white. **Upperparts:** Dorsum entirely brown (including folded wings); rusty brown anteriorly, progressively less rusty posteriorly. **Underparts:** Bold, blackish spotting on breast, anterior belly, sides and flanks; ground color clean, whitish. **Tail:** Square-tipped, unspotted brown. **Legs:** Flesh color (feet not seen well).

Vocalizations heard, other than the song, were a "pit-pit-pit" (frequently given) and, less frequently, a liquid "quirt." The song was a sequence of "eee-oh-lay" and "eee-oh-lee" phrases with rich harmonics varying in key, and variably preceded by "pit-pit-pit." About half of the time a phrase ended with a complex trill, usually on a higher pitch.

Sonograms of the recording, prepared by Gary Langham at California State University, Sacramento, plus a written account of the bird were submitted to the California Bird Records Committee and the Sacramento Bird Records Committee. If accepted, this would be one of only about 13 records of Wood Thrush for California, only the fourth in spring, and the first for the Central Valley. The Wood Thrush, which breeds in eastern North America and winters from Mexico to Panama, is of only casual occurrence anywhere in western North America.