

A Veery Specimen from the Central Valley

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On 16 May 2003, professor emeritus Walter E. Howard found a *Catharus* beneath a backyard window of his home at 24 College Park, Davis, Yolo County. He salvaged the dead animal and donated it to the Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology (MWFB) at the local campus of the University of California. There it was bagged and placed in a freezer as a putative Swainson's Thrush (*C. ustulatus*). On 3 February 2006, Engilis went through the backlog of frozen birds to prioritize them for preparation as specimens. He found this bird and reidentified it as a Veery (*C. fuscescens*). Mary Chambers, field biologist with the museum at the time, drew the task of specimen preparation. Engilis gave her the thrush, and without guidance, asked her to determine the species. She made standard measurements and, using Pyle (1997) as a guide, she additionally measured the in situ differences in length of several feathers of the wing. She confirmed Engilis's cursory identification. The specimen (WFB-6995) unfortunately was freezer burned. Chambers therefore prepared it as a freeze-dried specimen. It is a male, sex determined by laparotomy, with testes enlarged and fleshy.

The dorsal plumage is a uniformly rich rufous-brown (see the back cover for a variety of views of the specimen). A grayish-buff eye ring is weakly present inferiorly only. The lores and anterior auriculars are grayish, the posterior auriculars progressively more like the crown in color. The chin is light grayish, the malar areas are washed medium buff and streaked with medium brown, the throat and breast likewise washed with medium buff and fairly distinctly spotted with medium brown (the spotting extending slightly into the whitish lower breast), and the lower breast, belly and undertail coverts are bright white, contrasting distinctly with dingy grayish sides and flanks. Remiges have medium brown inner vanes, with the outer vanes the same reddish brown as the back. The rectrices dorsally are entirely reddish brown, slightly less richly so than the upper tail coverts and rump. The ventral surfaces of the rectrices are medium brown with a grayish cast, lacking rufous tones. Soft part colors when fresh were not recorded.

Different species within *Catharus* have different lengths and shapes of homologous feathers in the wings (Pyle 1997). It is these differences that enabled Chambers to assign unambiguously the Davis specimen to *C. fuscescens*. The lack of slight emargination on primary 6 is atypical, but several of the measurements (Table 1) and plumage features eliminate West Coast Swainson's Thrushes, particularly the races *C. u. ustulatus* and *C. u. phillipsi*, the other dorsally rufous-brown group among the *Cathari*.

Table 1. Measurements and wing feather comparisons for Veery and Swainson's Thrush (from Pyle 1997) compared to the Davis specimen. Data in bold italics are key measurements indicating the Davis bird is a Veery.

	Swainson's Thrush	Veery	Davis specimen
wing length (mm)	87 to 104	89 to 106	98
tail length (mm)	61 to 78	62 to 79	69
Ppcovs ¹ - p10 ² (mm)	-3 to 8	-2 to 9	5
p6 emarginated?	no	yes, slightly	no
p8 - p6 ³ (mm)	7 to 12	5 to 7	5.3
p8 - p5 (mm)	13 to 18	10 to 14	12
p8 - p1 (mm)	27 to 30	23 to 29	27

1 ppcovs = an abbreviation for the wing's primary coverts

2 p10 = the wing's tenth primary flight feather; p8 = the eighth primary, etc.

3 p8 - p6 = the difference between the tip of p8 and the tip of p6 measured in the closed wing.

MWFB has but a handful of Veery specimens, all recently collected. The Davis bird is more richly colored than two Texas specimens but less so than two East Coast birds, and is more distinctly spotted than all. We brought the Davis specimen to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) at the University of California, Berkeley, for comparison to their large series of *Catharus* thrushes. Most specimens there are several decades old. Because of the potential of foxing (color change of feathers of museum specimens over time), comparison was restricted to birds more recently taken. Though a good match for some individuals identified as *C. f. fuscescens* in the MVZ collection, it was a better fit to a series of *C. f. salicicola*. This similarity was based on generally heavier breast spotting and browner (less rufous) dorsal coloration in the latter race.

Subspecific taxonomy of the Veery is unsettled. The AOU (1957) recognized three races. Ripley (in Mayr and Paynter 1964) identified four subspecies. Phillips (1991) recognized five. Dickinson (2003) recognized four, deferring judgment on two races accepted by Phillips (see also Parkes in Dickerman and Parkes 1997). The only western race accepted by all authorities is *C. f. salicicola (salicicolus auctorum)*. The gender assignment of the subspecific epithet is in dispute.

Engilis submitted a brief note and five digital images of the specimen to Guy McCaskie, secretary of the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) (Figures 1-4). The ten records of Veery previously accepted by the CBRC were three spring migrants and seven autumn birds (Hamilton et al. 2007). After circulation of the record (CBRC Record 2009-072) among voting members, it was endorsed without comment on a 9-0 vote (McCaskie, in lit. to Trochet dated 1 December 2009). The 16 May date is the earliest accepted

record for the state. This record also is the first accepted from the Central Valley.

There are no known California winter or breeding records of Veery, but *C. f. salicicola* breeds sparingly west of the Rockies in the United States, apparently less widely and abundantly following riparian habitat degradation and loss due to activities of people and livestock. Arizona's known breeding sites near Springerville have had no nesting activity in 30 years (Corman and Wise-Gervais 2005). Nevada has no nesting record (Alcorn 1988, Martin Meyers, in lit. to Trochet dated 26 January 2010), though the species summers in small numbers at least intermittently in the northeast (Ryser 1985). In Oregon breeding Veeries are uncommon in the northeastern part of the state (Marshall et al. 2003). As the subspecific epithet suggests, western Veeries favor thick willows (*Salix*) for breeding. In some states (e.g., Utah) nesting occurs primarily in valley settings (Hayward et al. 1976), while in others (e.g., Oregon, Arizona, New Mexico) nesting Veeries use montane tangles of alders (*Alnus*) or willows (Marshall et al. 2003; Corman and Wise-Gervais 2005; Christopher Rustay pers. comm.). Competition from congeners seems to play a role in habitat selection in this race (Moskoff 1995). Although the Veery nests uncommonly in northeastern Oregon (Marshall et al. 2003), fairly commonly in Washington east of the Cascade Range (Wahl et al. 2005), and uncommonly to fairly commonly over most of the southern half of the mainland portion of British Columbia (Campbell, et al. 1997), few birds make it to California. This is due to a migratory route to and from the West that is thought to pass through eastern North America.

In general, the Veery is more rufous dorsally than Swainson's Thrush races of the West Coast (*ustulatus* group), but several Swainson's Thrush specimens at MVZ were a good match based on dorsal color alone. At MWFB, an 11 January 1969 Swainson's Thrush (WFB 6161Z) from the Davis campus is also a good match. A richly rufous brown-backed *Catharus* catches the eye, but by itself the dorsal coloration does not identify it to species. One must further note details of the eye ring, breast, sides and flanks, belly, and voice (if heard), too. This is often easier said than done, given Veery's tendency to skulk in dense cover. Even under ideal viewing conditions, the most experienced museum ornithologist may occasionally misidentify a "Veery" specimen in the hand (Patten 1997). See Lane and Jaramillo (2000) for a full treatment of the issues involved in field identification.

There are three previous reports of Veery from the Sacramento-Yolo region (Sacramento Audubon Bird Records, accessed at MWFB on 29 Jan 2010). All three records were not accepted by the Sacramento Bird Records Committee all due in part to lack of details as described above. All three identifications were based on the rich rufous coloration of the upperparts. The first was of a bird observed in Cold Canyon Natural Area Reserve, Solano County on 25 Apr 1981 (this bird was reported by Engilis, who later independently determined the identification incorrect). The second report

was of a bird seen in a wash along Ione Road just south of its intersection with Meiss Road, eastern Sacramento County on 10 May 1981. The third was of a bird reported on the Arboretum of the University of California, Davis on 18 Oct 1997.

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