

Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*



Folk Name: Tarkle-witch

Status: Winter Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common

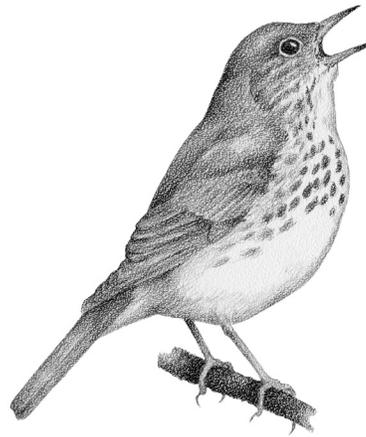
Habitat: Woodland understory

At just under 7 inches, the Hermit Thrush is our smallest thrush. It is also one of the easiest of our five spot-breasted thrushes to identify. It has a brown back with a distinctly rusty-red tail, which it often slowly wags. It has a complete, but thin, white eye-ring. Its flanks are olive brown. It has both distinct and indistinct spotting underneath. The spots are not as bold as those of the Wood Thrush, and they do not extend as far down as the spots of the Wood Thrush. The Hermit Thrush gets its common name because it is a shy, retiring bird that is regularly seen wandering alone, usually in deep, damp woods with a thick understory.

The Hermit Thrush breeds in the north-central and northeastern United States, north into Canada, and in parts of the western United States. It also breeds along the Appalachian Mountains from Pennsylvania south to North Carolina. Breeding populations in North Carolina and Virginia are not contiguous. Breeding was unknown in North Carolina until 1979, and this small population has been slowly expanding since it was discovered. The Hermit Thrush has now been confirmed during breeding season in spruce-fir forest, northern hardwood forest habitat, and birch-ash forests at: Roan Mountain, in the Black Mountains, the Great Craggy Mountains, the Great Balsam Mountains, the Smokies, and elsewhere, generally above 4,500 feet in elevation.

The Hermit Thrush is a winter resident throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It winters throughout the southern United States, Mexico, and Central America. This species may stop in any forest patch in the South that does not get snow sticking on the ground for more than a few days each year. Hermit Thrush normally begin to arrive in this region in October, and most return north to their breeding sites by the end of April.

Our earliest fall arrival date on record is 17 September. Tom Ledford reported this bird in Lancaster County and noted: “While leading the Mecklenburg Audubon field trip to Landsford Canal State Park we found an early Hermit Thrush. The bird was a typical Hermit Thrush which had brown upper parts and a rufous tail which was bobbing and it had a complete thin eye-ring. I’ve seen a lot of these over the years.” Our latest spring departure date is a bird H. Lee Jones had been watching and hearing sing in Charlotte from 11 May until 28 May in 1962, when it finally departed. Our peak single day tally is of 32 birds



counted on the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count in both 1995 and 2001.

“It is time to burn off the ditch-banks, broom-marshes and pasture lands, and you may be sure that robins and [Hermit] thrushes will be at the festival, ready for what grubs may come to view.” —*The Charlotte Observer*, February 1, 1906

William McIlwaine shared this delightful surprise on February 28, 1928, while he was on a personal quest to learn to identify winter birds in Charlotte:

But here was my discovery of the day. I had no dream they were within a good five hundred miles. I saw him across the creek down on a low limb over the water. From there he flew down, hopped a few feet, stopped and picked up a worm. As he stood



Hermit Thrush. (Will Stuart)

there I saw all but his tail, one solid color, an olive-brown, head and back exactly the same. My notes say the tail I could not see; and the books say his tail is one of the certain distinguishing marks. I wish I had known that; I should have gotten that clear before he flew. Yes, it was a thrush. I was amazed. But the book on N.C. birds says the hermit thrush is to be found in the state in the winter. That was he.

Four years later in 1930, he wrote: "I have learned that from November to April this is a fairly common bird."

Birds lingering in this region in late spring can occasionally be heard singing their breeding song. McIlwaine heard one "singing softly" in Charlotte on March 11, 1929. In 1930, Maurice Stimson described this bird's song he heard in Statesville as sounding like "liquid, tinkling, flute-like notes." H. Lee Jones heard a Hermit Thrush singing in Charlotte on May 21, 1962. The authors of *South Carolina Bird Life* noted: "There are people who regard the song of the Hermit Thrush as superior to that of every other North American bird."

In 2001, Bill Thompson III, editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, shared this note about Stanly County's John Trott and his method of attracting and photographing the Hermit Thrush and our other winter birds:

The late John Trott was a wonderful naturalist, writer, photographer, and teacher...When age and weather made it difficult for him to go afield to photograph birds, John would bring the birds close to his house. One of his most successful methods for attracting birds was to offer them food in winter that they could not find naturally in that season. In fall, John would gather wild grapes, pokeweed berries, American bittersweet, and sumac fruits and freeze them in plastic storage bags. Late in the winter, these fruits, placed near his regular feeding station, would lure hermit thrushes, eastern bluebirds, and American robins close enough for John to photograph.

In the early springtime, watch for good numbers of Hermit Thrushes foraging for worms and other food along wet roads after warm rains. Long, wooded park entrance roads are a good quiet place to look. Staff at the Reedy Creek Nature Preserve in Charlotte report seeing these birds foraging along their entrance road each spring, as they fuel up for their nocturnal flight north to their breeding grounds.