

Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus*



Folk Name: Olive-backed Thrush

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Woodland understory

The Swainson's Thrush breeds in the upper northeastern and upper north-central United States, north into Canada, and in the western United States. It may possibly have nested in the North Carolina mountains in the early twentieth century. In 1966, a small disjunct population was found on Mount Rogers in Virginia, and in 1986, at the top of Virginia's Beartown Mountain.

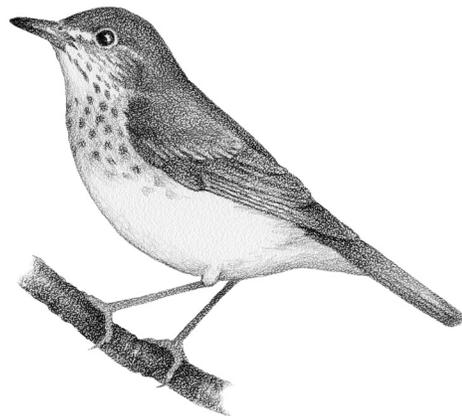
Swainson's Thrush was heard during breeding season in North Carolina at Roan Mountain and in the Black Mountains from 2005 through 2007. By 2008, between four and six males were on territory in the spruce-fir forest of the Black Mountains above 5,000 feet in elevation. This small population appears to be expanding.

The Swainson's Thrush was once commonly known as the Olive-backed Thrush. It can easily be confused with the Gray-cheeked Thrush, so care should be taken when identifying this bird. Its song is somewhat like that of the Veery, but it has an upward spiral instead of descending at the end.

It is an uncommon to fairly common migrant throughout the Carolina Piedmont each spring and fall. Spring records of birds moving through in the Central Carolinas range from 5 April through 28 May. Tom and Tammy Sanders observed the latter bird eating ripe mulberries in their yard. We have no reports from the months of June, July, or August.

Fall migrants have been documented here from 2 September through 3 November. Bill Hilton Jr. banded 49 individuals at Hilton Pond in York County during a single fall season in 1993. We have one report of a bird seen in the months of December through March. A bird was reported in Charlotte on December 12, 2011. Limited details were provided and no photograph was taken. This bird is virtually unknown in the Carolina Piedmont during the winter months. A sight report in Raleigh in 1982 and a sight report in Greensboro in 1984 were not supported by photographs. A Swainson's Thrush was well photographed visiting a backyard in Lexington, SC, on December 5–11, 2013. Photographs should be taken of any spot-breasted thrush other than a Hermit Thrush reported during the winter season.

In Oriental, NC, in December 1988 and January 1989, Dorothy Foy banded and then recaptured what she described as "the first documented record of this species seen and handled in January" in North America. She later



published a summary of known winter records in the United States and Canada through that time period.

Watson Perrygo collected a specimen of the western subspecies of Swainson's Thrush, called the Western Olive-backed Thrush, in Chester County on October 1, 1940. The specimen is in the collection at the Smithsonian. Eight Swainson's Thrushes were found dead at the base of the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte Municipal Airport on the morning of September 26, 1955. Joe and Becky Norwood reported an amazing total of 83 Swainson's Thrushes collected at the base of the WSOC tower in Charlotte in early October 1959. They were unable to positively identify another 15 bodies which they labelled as simply "thrush sp." Lessie Davis, a local songbird rehabilitator, was unable to save a juvenile bird found injured while moving through Charlotte on September 30, 2000.



Swainson's Thrush in Matthews. (Will Stuart)