

Wood Thrush *Hylocichla mustelina*



Folk Name: Swamp Robin, Quillaree

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Deciduous forests with developed understory and forested neighborhoods

The Wood Thrush is the last and perhaps best known of our five spot-breasted thrushes. It is the only one of the five that nests here in the Carolina Piedmont. It is a rich, cinnamon brown above and white below, and it has a distinct white eye-ring. It has the most spotting of all of our thrushes, with large, distinct dark spots extending from its throat to its belly, and along its sides.

The Wood Thrush is renowned for its amazing singing ability. Many people consider it to be not just the finest singing thrush, but the premier American songbird. It sings where it often nests—deep in our hardwood forests. Often, people will hear the song each spring, but they may never actually get a glimpse of the bird singing it. Thankfully, some of these birds can be found nesting in forested neighborhoods where they are more readily seen.

In 1896, one Mecklenburg County farmer shared this sentiment in a letter to the *Mecklenburg Times*:

The day is always more beautiful for having been ushered in by the joyous melodies of the sweet singers. I cannot quit the paragraph without alluding to my favorite songster—the brown wood-thrush. In driving the cows from the wood pasture to the barn in the evening, I have often been-like-Dryden, “and I was so ravished with her heavenly notes I stood entranced, and had no room for thought.”

In the 1920s, Charlotte’s William McIlwaine wrote: “The [Wood] thrush represents about the highest form of bird life. And the thrush’s song is probably the most appealing of all.”

On April 20, 1939, Statesville’s Grace Anderson wrote: “I can never have anything to offer you in my garden half so sweet as the notes of the returned Wood-thrush that rang like bells-over-the-hills in my garden early this morning.”

A Wood Thrush was admitted to Davis Hospital in Statesville in May 1949 for treatment for a broken leg. It was treated with a splint and released to its caregiver for rehabilitation, who later wrote:

This year the wood thrush returned to Statesville on April 9. The bird was singing in a maple tree on Rare Street. The afternoon, filled with the old miracle of greening trees spangled with spring sunlight,



J F M A M J J A S O N D

listened to the most hauntingly beautiful bird song on this continent. Rested after his long journey from South America, or Bahamas, or Cuba, he probably had come back the day before. Weary, migrating birds do not sing immediately upon arrival. It is no small thing to save a bird that has magic power of linking earth to heaven [through song].

The Wood Thrush is both a migrant and breeding bird throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Most move through in the months of April and September. The birds that remain to breed here have generally mated and built nests by the third week of April. Our earliest spring arrival was a bird seen and heard singing on 30 March in 2012. Our peak count is 108 birds tallied on a spring count in 1978.



Wood Thrush. (Jeff Lemons)

Most Wood Thrushes have moved out of this region by mid-October. Our latest fall departure was also a bird both seen and heard singing, this time on 4 November in 1995. The latter bird was reported by Lex Glover and Mike Turner near the town of Carlisle in Union County, SC. Will Stuart photographed one in Mint Hill on that same date in 2016. This bird had lingered in his yard for several days eating ripe, purplish beautyberries.

There are very few reports of the Wood Thrush in the Carolinas in winter, and reports from this season are often received with a great deal of skepticism. Mrs. A.W. Bachman, an experienced birder, reported a Wood Thrush in Charlotte on February 10, 1940. Bachman's report was accepted by the editor and published in *The Chat*. Three years later, Roxie Collie Simpson confirmed an injured Wood Thrush in Raleigh had survived there throughout the winter of 1942–1943. There have been at least four other winter reports from the Carolina Piedmont since. We have one additional report of this bird seen in this region, during the months of December, January, or February. A lone Wood Thrush was reported as “well described” from observers helping with the Spartanburg Christmas Bird Count on January 2, 1998. Later, the editor of *The Chat* remarked about this bird: “When will one of these winter thrushes get photographed, thereby making believers out of the skeptics?!”

Nests of the Wood Thrush were once fairly easily found. In the early twentieth century, this bird nested in most wooded residential areas throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Many nests in neighborhoods were lined with light-colored leaves and often with paper. Alexander Sprunt Jr. reported finding one in Rock Hill that had a great deal of paper in it and “on a flap dangling a little below the nest were the plainly legible words ‘Room for Rent.’” On May 3, 1927, William McIlwaine reported his “first nest of the season.” He described it as “a characteristic [lightly-mud-lined and bowl-shaped] nest, on a horizontal limb, well out, on top supported by a little upright twig. One light blue egg.”



A Wood Thrush on its nest. (Jeff Lemons)

In April 1928, he reported:

Hundreds of thrushes nest in Charlotte every year. My nearest thrush neighbor last season had his nest in a tree in the yard of Mrs. Frank Dowd on Park Avenue. Other interesting nests were: one in the yard of Mrs. R.O. Alexander on Park Avenue that was ornamented with a streamer of about four feet of kite tail, and another in the yard of Frank Pegram on Eleventh Street, from which hung by one corner a large handkerchief. But Frank Jr., had no use for it anyway.

He found another Wood Thrush nest “five feet up in bushes, and with just one egg.” In May, McIlwaine found one “wood thrush sitting on her nest in a tree by the spring in Latta Park,” then he showed the nest to a class from D.H. Hill School. “They all agreed that with its paper and kite tail streamers it was a very slovenly-looking affair.”

Elizabeth Clarkson confirmed two Wood Thrush nests in Charlotte in the spring of 1943. Her notes indicated most Wood Thrush nests were begun by 17 April. Nesting can continue throughout the summer and second broods are common. While visiting Davidson College from August 1–10, 1944, Dr. Archie Shaftesbury counted a total of 14 Wood Thrushes “including some still being fed by their parents.”

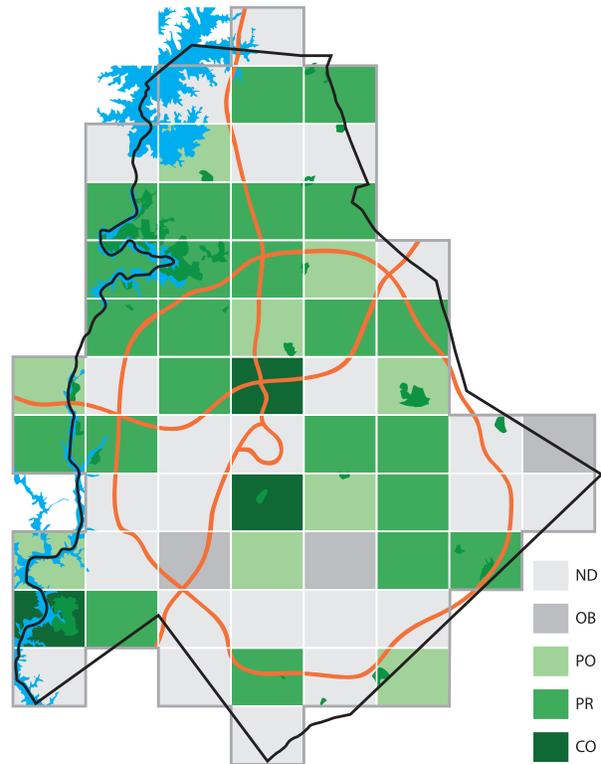
Today, the nest of the Wood Thrush is much harder to find in the region. Most are built in large forest patches which are becoming rare. Nests are now infrequently found in small wooded patches and wooded neighborhoods in our towns and cities, possibly due to increased nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds. The key habitat requirement is a moist forest understory of deciduous shrubs where the thrush can forage for invertebrates among dead leaves on the ground or in the branches of low shrubs and sapling trees.

The Wood Thrush is a nocturnal migrant and, like our other night-flying birds, it faces many difficulties along its long migration route. Three were collected by Audubon members at the base of the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte airport on the morning of September 26, 1955. Joe and Becky Norwood reported a total of 37 Wood Thrushes, “all very fat,” collected at the base of the WSOC tower in Charlotte in October 1959. Volunteers with Mecklenburg Audubon's Lights Out study collected more than two dozen dead Wood Thrushes from the base of buildings in the center of Charlotte between 2012 and 2014.

The Wood Thrush is a neotropical migrant that has had serious population declines over the past half century. This bird is both area sensitive and sensitive to forest fragmentation. For the past three decades, this thrush has been promoted as a stark symbol of declining deciduous forest habitat in the eastern United States. It has also been impacted by both cowbird parasitism and by loss of habitat on its wintering grounds. In North Carolina,

spring bird count results have shown a decline from more than one bird found per field-hour in the 1960s, to an average of only 0.26 per field-hour today. Breeding Bird Survey data in both Carolinas indicate steep, statistically significant population declines over the past few decades.

The Wood Thrush is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Fairly Widespread (PR/23, CO/3)