

Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*



Folk Name: Rusty Mockingbird, Brown Thrush

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Brushy habitat, field edges, thickets (often dry), residential areas

The Brown Thrasher is our largest Mimic Thrush. At 11 ½ inches, it is a full 1 ½ inches longer than our abundant Northern Mockingbird. The Brown Thrasher is cinnamon brown above and white below. Its underparts are streaked with dark brown and it has a very long cinnamon-brown tail. Adults have a yellow eye and they have whitish bands on their wing coverts. The Brown Thrasher is a ground-feeding bird of thickets and dense forest edges, although when it sings, it perches prominently at the top of a tree.

Like both the Gray Catbird and Northern Mockingbird, the Brown Thrasher mimics other bird songs. It sings each song twice before moving on to the next one. The Gray Catbird sings each song once, and the Northern Mockingbird generally sings each song three or more times before switching to a different song. With practice, it is easy to distinguish between the singing of our three Mimic Thrushes.

Brown Thrashers forage on the ground for beetles, caterpillars, and other insects, and they also eat seeds, grains, acorns, and fruits. They are occasionally seen snapping up a lizard, frog, or small snake. Like the catbird,



Brown Thrasher fledglings. Nestlings.
(Jim Guyton, Phil Fowler)



they eat cultivated fruits, but not to the same degree. They are often seen using their bill to scratch the ground, turn over, and toss leaves, which is unlike the behavior of any of our other songbirds.

On July 14, 1939, Verne E. Davison, with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, collected a Brown Thrasher in Charlotte. He analyzed its stomach contents and confirmed it had been eating the fruit of an escaped exotic shrub called Autumn Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata* var. *parviflora*). At the time, this shrub was being widely recommended for use in erosion control and wildlife habitat improvement. The results of Davison's study helped the Soil Conservation Service "sell" their idea of the wide-scale planting of this shrub, which the agency provided for free, to landowners throughout the South. Today, like Kudzu, Autumn Olive is designated a serious invasive threat to native plants throughout the southeastern states. It is now considered one of our most undesirable invasive shrubs as it out-competes native shrubs in their natural environment. But today, many of our birds rely on *Elaeagnus* (spp.) fruits in the late summer, fall, and winter.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Brown Thrasher was known to winter in this region "irregularly," and when it did, it was "not very common." In the late 1920s, William McIlwaine reported it as a "summer resident" that generally arrived by 11 March and departed by 7 November. He found one on February 4, 1931. In Statesville in 1930, Dr. J.E. McLaughlin mentioned that they were "sometimes seen in this locality in January, though it usually winters farther south." In 1939, Charlie Sellers reported the Brown Thrasher was an abundant breeding bird in the region that began to arrive in numbers by 2 March and in 1940, Elizabeth Clarkson made a point to report that the Brown Thrasher was "spending the winter almost every year." Grace Anderson reported a Brown Thrasher in Statesville on November 6, 1941, and noted it "may linger if the winter is as mild as it was last year." Today, this bird is a resident with good

numbers found throughout the winter, but numbers still drop noticeably during the coldest weeks. Some of our wintering birds are believed to be birds from further north.

Brown Thrashers can begin nesting as early as February and egg laying can continue into July. They can raise as many as three broods in this region. In the 1920s, William McIlwaine shared several accounts of Brown Thrasher nests he found in Charlotte. On June 24, 1926, he:

Found also two thrasher nests. One had little birds nearly ready to leave the nest. They were very much afraid of me, crouching, and “freezing.” The other nest had three eggs on which the mother was sitting. One of these nests was about two ft. up in switches against trunk of a poplar (*Lombardy*). The other was about four ft. up in bushes by a little tree. I had found another nest about a week previously one ft. up in a cedar that had its branched [*sic*] down to the ground. Three little birds. Of course these are the second broods of the year.

On April 1, 1928, he wrote:

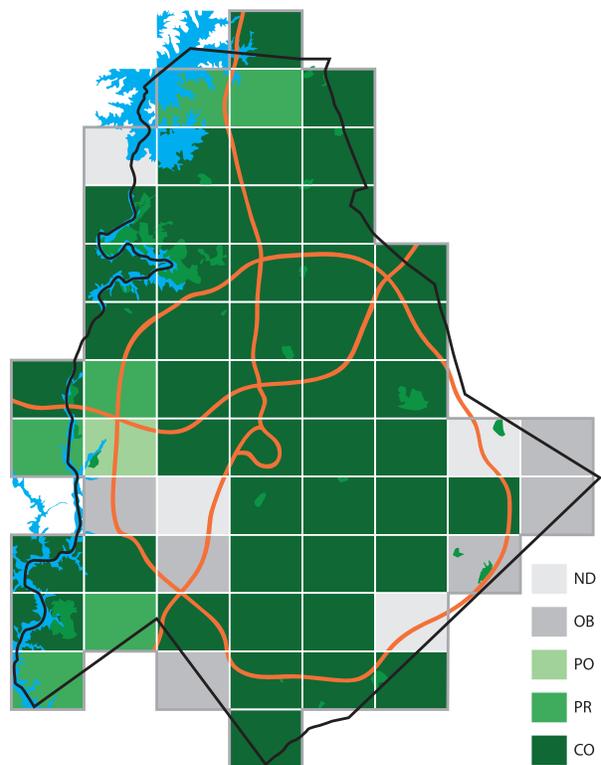
Some think the brown thrasher a better singer than the mocking bird. The thrasher nests all over Charlotte wherever he can find some thick tangle; or indeed a low-limbed cedar will do. John Burroughs says the thrasher’s nest is hard to find. Not so in this Country. But this premier singer cannot compete with egg hunters. Unless our small boys stop robbing its nests this bird will become rare in our city.

On May 15, 1928, he had found “thrashers in all stages of housekeeping. Some nests have eggs, others little birds, and others are empty for a few days while the parents are caring for the scattered young. Thrasher nests are always to be found in thick vines or bushes from immediately at the ground to up to twelve feet.”

In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson reported: “The Brown Thrashers began to build February 27, only one egg hatched and something happened to that, probably the exceptional cold, rainy spell. I took the nest and three eggs in for record after they had begun to sit on new eggs in a Chinese Flowering Crab, first found her sitting on the new eggs April 9.” In 1965, she reported: “One record of bird sitting on full clutch of eggs February, 14, three broods.”

MCPRD staff monitored seven Brown Thrasher nests active during the month of June in an effort to determine nest success. Out of the seven nests, 72% (an unusually high number) successfully fledged young, 14% of the nests were depredated, and 14% of the nests failed.

Rhett Chamberlain watched a Brown Thrasher engaged in an unusual behavior in his yard in Matthews on May 30, 1954. The thrasher was “anting.” He wrote: “The bird was picking up ants from the ground immediately in front of it and placing them in fluffed feathers of its breast. The operation was repeated three times. The bird was one of a pair that was at the time feeding two well grown young at our feeder.” Chamberlain noted that to his knowledge, this was “a first record of anting by a Brown Thrasher” and “raises to sixteen, the number of species of birds reported anting that I have knowledge of.” “Dusting” is another behavior commonly exhibited by Brown Thrashers in this region. They wallow and flap in a sandy dried-up puddle, “bathing” in the mist of dust that is raised. It is believed that this behavior helps keep them free of parasites.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/6, CO/45)