

Eastern Towhee *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*

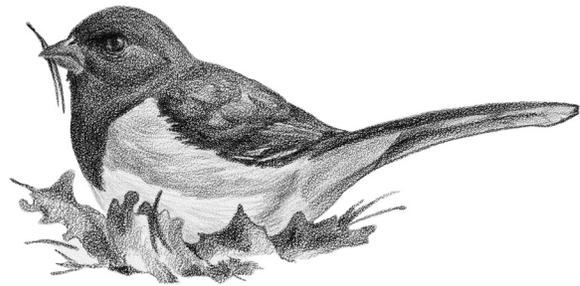


Folk Name: Joree, Che-Wink, Ground Robin, Red-eyed Towhee, Rufous-sided Towhee

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Thickets, shrubs, saplings, woodland understory and edge, shrubs in neighborhoods



The Eastern Towhee is our largest member of the Emberizidae family. At 8 ½ inches, it is just shy of the average size of a Cardinal. The male Eastern Towhee has a jet-black hood, black wings and back, and a long black tail with white on the ends of the three outer tail feathers. He flashes a small white patch on each wing in flight. His sides are rufous chestnut, and his belly is white. He has a red eye and for a time his accepted common name was the “Red-eyed” Towhee. The female towhee looks similar except “her suit is brown” not black.

The towhee gets its name from its call that sounds like a repeated *tow-hee, tow-hee*. Some people interpreted this call as *che-wink, che-wink*. Many Southerners translated it as *Joree, Joree*, and for more than a century, that was its common name throughout this region. The towhee is also known for its song that has been interpreted as *drink your tea-e-e-e!*

This bird is often found in scrubby overgrown thickets, dense woodland understory, and residential shrubs. It is also a regular visitor to backyard bird feeders. Towhees spend most of their day scratching through dead leaves and grass on the ground in search of bugs, berries, and seeds. The loud noise they make has often been reported as sounding like “chickens scratching.” One South Carolina birder noted: “Characteristic of this foraging is the Towhees ability to scratch with both feet at the same



A male Eastern Towhee. (Will Stuart)



time and still bring them forward fast enough to keep balance.”

The breeding range of the Eastern Towhee in the Carolinas has expanded during the past 100 years. In the nineteenth century, the towhee was a common breeding bird in the mountains of the Carolinas and along the Coastal Plain, but this species was known only as a winter resident in most of the Carolina Piedmont. This bird was abundant during spring and fall migration and common in the winter months. Most of these birds from northern breeding grounds arrived in October and left by April.

In July 1888, Leverett Loomis first reported “the extension of this species along the northern boundary of the State during breeding season” when he heard two males “sing daily at All-Healing Springs, at the foot of Crowders Mountain—a peak of the Kings Mountain chain, just over the line in North Carolina, about forty miles north of Chester.” In 1889, Loomis reported the towhee as only a migrant in Chester County, but reported it as a resident from the town of Spartanburg and westward into upstate South Carolina. He wrote:

June 5, while en route for the mountains, I shot a male in full song three miles west of Spartanburgh Court House. Another was heard singing later in the day at a mill pond on the Middle Tiger, also in Spartanburgh County. As I was returning home, July 4, through the same County, the call-notes of one were heard on the outskirts of the court-house town while another sang with effect at my noonday camp, five miles south of it on the Spartanburgh and Union Railroad.

On June 9, 1909, Mrs. C.S. Bruner reported a towhee in Taylorsville in Alexander County. A decade later in 1919, the authors of *Birds of North Carolina* stated: “We have had no clear and definitive records of it in breeding season in the Piedmont, unless the Taylorsville record could be so considered.” However, this bird was also being

reported in Stokes and Rockingham counties at that time. The towhee expanded east into the Carolina Piedmont during the late 1930s or early 1940s.

The first week of April 1928, William McIlwaine wrote: “The towhee, or chewink, is a beautiful bird that is singing now in our swampy places. He flies before you in his black and white and orange and brown, calling, calling, continually his name, ‘chewink, chewink, chewink,’ or ‘tow-he-he-he-he.’ A few more weeks and he too will be gone to his home in our mountains or further north.”

In 1929–1930, McIlwaine designated the “Red-eyed” Towhee in Charlotte as a “common winter resident” and migrant arriving in late October and departing as late as 22 May. He stated there were “no Charlotte nesting records.” He also noted that “the females seem to be a little behind the males, disappearing after the first week of May.”

In September 1930, the editor of Statesville’s *Landmark* wrote:

Another bird that comes in here in the winter season is the chewink, sometimes called the towhee, or joree. A few of these birds remain here all winter, though most go farther south. Their song is loud and clear, “towhee-e-o” or “see-tow-hee-e-e,” with the last note tremulous. The notes are not closely connected. The chewink does not nest in this section. Dr. McLaughlin remarked incidentally that these birds make fine potpies. However, they are now under the protection of both Federal and state laws.

A year later, William McIlwaine discovered his first towhee in the greater Charlotte region during breeding season on July 10, 1931. He wrote: “Of course there were towhees at Banner Elk and higher. But it remained for me to get a surprise, as I was nearly home. Just a few miles above Mt. Holly—possibly 15–18 miles [west] from Charlotte there flew across my path a towhee. This means he was housekeeping there. Which is my nearest record toward Charlotte summer residence.”

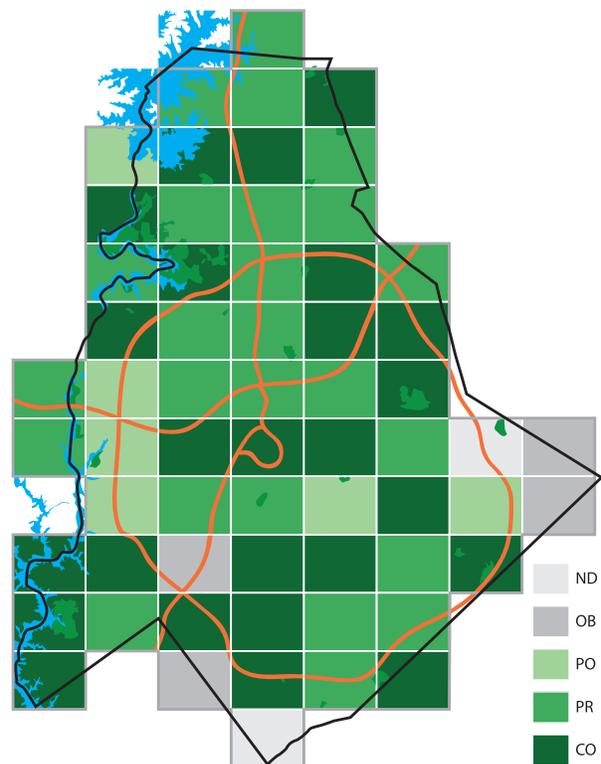


Towhee nest at McDowell Nature Preserve. (MCPRD staff)

In the late 1930s, Charlie Sellers noted the towhee as “abundant” in both winter and migration, but he still was unable to confirm a nest in Charlotte. He did report the towhee was nesting “commonly” at Kings Mountain in Gaston and Cleveland counties, about 20 miles to the west of the city. In 1937, Lacy C. McAllister discovered two nests in Guilford County in Irving Park in Greensboro which were described as the first for that area. In 1939, C.S. Brimley published a request for nesting records to help get a handle on this slow range expansion in the Piedmont for use in the second edition of the *Birds of North Carolina*: “Any breeding records of Towhees outside of the mountains would be very welcome.”

By 1940, the breeding situation had changed in Mecklenburg County. Charlie Sellers declared the towhee had become a “permanent resident” and provided this note: “Formerly an abundant winter resident, the Towhee has now become quite common all summer. We believe we are on the southeastern extremity of the breeding area of this species.” Elizabeth Clarkson followed up with this note published in *The Chat* in 1940: “[The towhee] [i]s now quite common all summer. We watched one build a nest at the foot of our hedge, but the nest was never used. They come to my feeding tray all summer.” C.S. Brimley summarized the expansion in the 1942 edition of *Birds of North Carolina*: “Resident in the mountains and in much of the Piedmont.”

Today, the Eastern Towhee is a common permanent



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/25, CO/25)

resident that nests throughout the Piedmont of both Carolinas as well as in the mountains and on the coast. It will often raise three broods a year. Towhee nests are at times well hidden and may be difficult to find. The first is often placed on the ground and the next nest is often built in a shrub a few feet off the ground. Elizabeth Clarkson shared these details of her first search for this bird in an essay published in *The Chat*:

I hunted for years for a Towhee's nest because they have always been in my garden, winter and summer, but I could never find one. Then I watched one building in my eleven-foot evergreen hedge around the main garden, and it was building about 7 feet from the ground. Since then I have found at least two nests a year in my garden and the closest to the ground has been five feet, nine inches. The two this year were, the first six feet seven inches, the second nine feet seven inches, both measured from top rim to ground. The books all say "on or near the ground," but if I have never found one on or near the ground, it surely cannot be too unusual

for them to build up some distance. A student of Pettingill's is making a special study of the Towhee, and I hope he will clear up a number of things. It is a common bird, but I do not believe it has been too well studied.

Nesting in this region begins in late March and continues until late July or into early August. The average clutch size reported in the Central Carolinas is 3–4 eggs. Incubation lasts about 12 days. The nests are often depredated or parasitized. Joe Norwood watched a male Eastern Towhee feed a young Brown-headed Cowbird in a Charlotte backyard on May 27, 1963.

In 2001, MCPRD staff implemented a nest success study to learn more about the perils faced by birds nesting in local fields. A total of 45 Eastern Towhee nests were monitored over several nesting seasons. One-half (50%) of the nests were depredated, and 17% of the nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds. Only 25% of the nests successfully fledged towhee young, while 8% of the nests fledged both towhee and Brown-headed Cowbird young. Fire ants, black rat snakes, and raccoons were implicated in nest failures.