

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

The Brown Thrasher

Almost any day in spring or summer, as I open the door and step onto the porch, I see him coming. He may come running up the driveway or hurrying across the lawn. Head down, back straight, long brown tail held stiffly out behind him—he runs, hops, and sometimes even flies a little in his eagerness to reach me. I have no illusions that he, like a dog, is just glad to see me. Oh, no, it is what I have in my hand that he wants. Be it breakfast, lunch, or dinner, he wants to get his share before the other freeloaders discover my presence. He seems to prefer avoiding a hassle, but he can hold his own in any crowd if need be. Who wouldn't be intimidated by that long, decurved beak or fierce yellow eye? He is, of course, one of my "tame" Brown Thrashers.

The Brown Thrasher has been a favorite of mine for as long as I can remember. When I was a child, living in Asheville, N.C., we had no Mockingbirds. The Brown Thrasher was one of the first summer residents to return in the spring, and his song brought us much joy. I recall playing "house" with my dolls at the base of an old beech tree in the woods. I would be startled by the noise of something rustling leaves on the ground nearby. Was it one of my brothers, coming to spy on me? Or, worse yet, a stranger coming to hurt me and my precious "children"? No! It was a lovely brown bird with a long beak and tail and a bright yellow eye. It was throwing leaves in all directions, looking for its dinner. In some of the mountain counties it is called the "ground thrasher."

The thrasher is basically a shy bird, preferring to stay out of sight. It nests in thick hedges or low bushes and goes about its business in a quiet manner, except for the "thrashing of the leaves" and glorious song in spring. The song is far more beautiful than that of the Mockingbird and much less tedious. The latter will get on to a new sound and keep it up for hours on end—and during the night, even! But like the Mockingbird, his cousin, the thrasher sings from the highest point in his territory. Near our house there is a tall transmission line tower. It is not unusual to find a male thrasher singing from its top.

A number of years ago, when we first lived here, there were very few birds around. The people who lived here before us had kept a cat. Within a year or so, with the cat gone, more and more birds began to show up and hang around. One morning in the summer of our second year, I looked out the window and saw an adult Brown Thrasher with a band on his foot. Close behind him, walking up our driveway, was a nearly full-grown fledgling. The old bird and the young one hunted our yard for several days. The banded adult departed, but the young one stayed on. We have never been without a thrasher since that day. From him, and his descendants, we have learned much about this species. I cannot recall now whether that young bird stayed with us all winter as I

was not keeping records or notes at the time. He was around in late winter. In the spring, a female was wooed by our bird, and they nested nearby.

Meanwhile, I was trying to "tame" a male Rufous-sided Towhee by offering him sunflower seeds and bits of bread (the cornmeal and peanut butter mixture I now use had not been invented then). The towhee was feeding young and soon overcame his fear in his eagerness to get food for his babies. Since the towhee and thrasher feed on the ground under the hedges, it soon became apparent that the thrasher was aware of the free and easy food. By the end of the summer, both towhee and thrasher would come fairly close to me as long as they had young to feed. I called the thrasher "Pretty Bird," and it is that name to which all thrashers now respond when I call.

Do I hear someone asking, "How in the world can you tell a male from a female thrasher?" My reply is that the male is the one that is singing. Also, over the years, I have noted that the female tends to be slightly smaller and daintier than the male. Close and continuous observation of birds reveals small differences in size, markings, and coloration (in some pairs I have known, one will be plain brown and the other more rufous). And personality traits vary from bird to bird.

During the winter, the adult males remain here, coming to feed from time to time. The females and immatures disappear, and, I presume, go farther south and/or east. At any rate, the females usually return in late winter, sometimes in early February. The male has already begun to sing and stake out his territory. When the female shows up, he tries to chase her away as an intruder. Before long, he realizes his mistake and courtship is under way. No pair of birds is more devoted. He sings as he never sang before—long, loud, and lilting. I often see them hunting together, and they remind me of a pair of hand-holding lovers. Then one day I see only one thrasher, which keeps up his song most of the day, and I say, "Aha! She must be sitting on a nest!"

Some years I run across the nest by chance—I never go hunting for one. It is likely to be in a thick and/or thorny shrub, such as a *Pyracantha* or Blackberry Rose. One year I was able to watch as the birds built. Both birds worked together on the basic foundation of large sticks and twigs. The female completed and lined the nest with finer material while the male sang to her from a nearby perch. As soon as the nest was ready, the female deposited two eggs, a day apart. She wasted no time beginning incubation. She sat upon the eggs faithfully, through rain and shine, chill and heat, day and night. She left only for brief periods, during the warmest part of the day, to feed and get water. The male did not get on the nest but remained nearby to guard it. At the end of two and a half weeks, the eggs hatched (perhaps a day apart, I did not wish to disturb the birds to find out). The male ceased his singing and went to work hunting food while the female brooded the naked, helpless babies. Within a week of hatching, the young were sufficiently feathered to protect them from the elements (except rain); the female could leave them for short periods and join the male in feeding them.

By the end of the second week, the nestlings had grown to about half the size of the parents and were becoming quite active. They spent considerable time standing on the rim of the nest, flexing their muscles and exercising their tiny wings. Within a few days they left the nest—one remaining a night longer than the other.

It has been my observation that young birds (of several species) leave the nest when they want to, not that the parents have to urge them. In fact, the parent birds generally appear agitated and spend much time scolding and coaxing the fledglings to safe perches above ground. They are especially upset if something or someone has come too close to the nest, causing the young to leave prematurely. If one cannot resist watching nesting birds, it is better to do it at a distance, with binoculars. We delay pruning shrubbery in the spring if there is any sign that a bird may have a nest there. Thrasher nests are usually pretty safe from cats, but once the fledglings are out, they are vulnerable to many predators.

It is amazing how fast a newly fledged thrasher can run, if need be. However, it can barely fly, if at all. Getting a baby off the ground and up into a shrub or tree takes time.

The fledgling has to hop, fluttering its tiny wings, from one twig to another. Except for an immediate threat of danger, the parent thrashers do not use their harsh and urgent scold note, but call to the young with a soft chirruping sound. They use this call also when trying to locate the fledglings once they can fly and move about more freely. The male occasionally sings a whisper song to find a young one.

Most of the time, the young respond as desired by the old birds. But not always! Occasionally a fledgling, like Epaminondas, "doesn't have the sense he was born with" and cannot or will not behave. I recall one instance where the nest was next to the street. One fledgling hopped into the street. No amount of coaxing could make it move. I even interfered by picking up the baby bird and placing it in a bush. Within minutes, it was back in the street again. Of course, the inevitable happened—it was run over by a car!

When the baby thrashers are still in the nest, they remain fairly quiet and do not call attention to themselves as do Cardinals and American Robins. When first fledged, they stay hidden and quiet for the most part. The call of a fledgling is pleasant and soft. And oh, how cute they are! They seem so tiny, with big dark eyes, little tufts of feathers over the eyes, and short stubby tails. They are dark brown in color, but have the unmistakable streaked breasts and wing bars of the adult. As they begin to grow, they follow their parents about. Their begging is subdued—not harsh and raucous as is a young Blue Jay, Starling, or Brown-headed Cowbird. The sound is more of a whimper.

The adult birds divide the fledglings and head in opposite directions with them—a survival tactic, no doubt. Usually all of our thrashers are double-brooded and have two young per nest. When something happens to one of the first brood, I have known them to have three in the second brood. Depending upon whether it is the first brood, or the second, the amount of time spent with the adults varies. With a first brood, the male takes both young when the female begins a new nest. I might mention here, that the courtship period for the second nest is very brief, with the male singing only a day or two—perhaps a reinforcement of the pair bonding. A short time before the second brood hatches, the male takes the young away and leaves them—just as the old bird left me my first thrasher. After the second brood is on its own, the old birds permit the young to remain in the territory, even after they have ceased to feed them. By this time, the old birds have begun their postnuptial molt and spend much of their time in the shade, just resting.

The second brood appears to get far more time and attention than does the first one. By the time these birds are out of the nest, it is hot weather for sure. The old birds begin sunbathing and dustbathing, the young ones watching and following suit. It is during these periods that I have watched the young birds at play—chasing each other and fledglings or immatures of other species, such as towhees and robins. They pick up new objects, mouthing them to see what they are and if they are edible. They begin to find a bit of food on their own here and there. They also watch the old birds catch and beat a grasshopper or cricket to pieces, and sometimes, the old bird will eat the food, not giving the young a bite! Then they will whimper a bit. As the young birds grow and prove to the parents that they can get their own food, the old birds begin to leave them for long periods of time, continuing to feed them occasionally. Here, where I feed them, the old birds bring their juveniles and "dump" them on me, and the youngsters quickly learn to come for my hand-outs. After a while, the old birds stop feeding the young at all and will turn them away if they venture too close.

As the years go by, we lose some thrashers to illness or accident, but there is always a new generation coming along. As the numbers of individual birds and species that come here for food have expanded, I find it more difficult to keep up with and recognize some individual thrashers—but they know me! Well, they know my food.

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Distraction Display of Chestnut-sided Warbler

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At 1100 EDT on 16 June 1981 I was hiking along a dirt road leading up the side of John's Knob (1200 m) in Graham County, N.C., when a female Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*) flew from a small *Rubus* thicket along the roadside and alighted on the ground about 3 m from me. The bird was a female, showing a chestnut stripe broken in several places on its sides, a white cheek with only a trace of black below the eye, and generally less intense and less extensive greenish-yellow towards the back of the head and back than would be expected on a male. It began to chip excitedly and to drag its wings, especially the left one, while running along the ground in front of me. When I approached the bird it flew into a small tree 2 m from my head and began chipping "in protest," obviously excited and with its crown erect. A 10-minute search of the immediate vicinity failed to turn up either a nest or young, but this does not mean that one or the other did not exist. Throughout the search the bird engaged in numerous broken-wing displays and chipped frequently. Interestingly, the bird would feign a broken wing only when I was within a small area with a diameter of about 4 m. The bird's mate, a well-marked male, was seen foraging close by, but it did not engage in such antics. Lee noted that among the warblers breeding in the Carolinas only the Black-and-white and the Swainson's have been recorded performing broken-wing acts (Chat 44:111-112).

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The females and immatures begin to disappear in late September and early October. Usually they move on following a cold front that has brought with it a number of migrant thrashers from the north. When these new birds appear, there is much scolding and chasing for a day or two and then all are gone. The males who winter here seem to wander during this period in early fall, but by November, can be found in their accustomed haunts.

For the past few winters we have had two males staying over. Naturally, they do not get on well together. One stays in the hedge on one side of the house and the other on the opposite side. Except during extremely cold or snowy times, they rarely come in contact with each other. At these times, they appear to be somewhat more tolerant of each other. However, when the days begin to warm and grow longer, the two male thrashers are often seen chasing each other. When the territories are staked out, one must not cross over into that of the other. This usually means that they nest in yards other than mine, but they continue to slip in for food.

During the winter months the male thrashers revert to their typical shyness. I rarely see them except when they come for food. On warm winter days, I can hear one or both of them singing a whisper song from a concealed perch in an evergreen. By mid-January, they sing more often and for longer periods of time. When mid-February comes, singing begins in earnest as they map out their territories. With the return of the females, the singing reaches its highest and loveliest peak—from dawn until dark.