

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.

A Varied Thrush in Orange County: First Record for North Carolina

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On either 22 or 23 Dec 2005 (the date unrecorded), my dogs and I flushed a strange bird along my wooded driveway at 5244 Old Woods Road in rural Orange County, NC. At the lowest point on the drive, just after we had crossed a tiny stream, a bird flew up from the ground near my feet. It had a warm-brown back and a spread tail showing the outermost tail feather on each side with a pale spot at the tip. The bird alighted on a nearby branch, and I could see a very prominent eyebrow stripe that extended far behind the eye and stayed wide (no taper) as in a Louisiana Waterthrush's eyebrow. I did not have binoculars, but I could clearly see a light-orange breast. I was away 24–27 Dec, but on 28 Dec, this time while driving, I saw the bird again on my driveway. The bird started up from on or near the ground, flew to a low perch, then flew up to a higher one where it sat watching me quietly, with no flitting, wing-flicking, or vocalizing. From a distance of about 30 feet I saw the light-orange breast again, the bright eyebrow, and for a brief moment the bill in profile. The bill was thrush-like, with the tip slightly down-turned, as I have seen in the bills of Eastern Bluebirds. The bird looked bigger to me than a Hermit Thrush but less stout than an American Robin.

On 29 Dec, again from my vehicle, I encountered the bird in the same spot as the first time: low woods between my driveway and the little spring-fed stream. The bird flew from near the ground upward to a branch, then to another branch just 10 or 12 feet above my driveway and about 40 feet away, where I observed it with 10x binoculars in good morning light.

I could now see a distinct mouse-gray breast band extending all the way across the chest, scaly gray flanks, and a white belly, in addition to the bright eyebrow and light-orange breast. The wings exhibited parallel wing bars and at least two other markings at odd angles nearer the wingtips. Like the eyebrow stripe, these markings appeared pale and strongly contrasting. The

legs looked pink. I consulted references and found that the bird along my driveway matched almost perfectly the adult female Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) pictured in Sibley (2000). However, Sibley describes the female's wing markings and eyebrow as orange; likewise the National Geographic Guide (1999) shows them as extremely orange. On the bird I observed they looked light and bright, perhaps buff, but not orange.

Attempts by my neighbor, Kent Fiala, on 29 Dec to find the bird failed, but at four o'clock that afternoon, in waning light, I saw it one more time as it flew up from almost the same spot. It seemed to have been lurking in or under a small beech tree with many retained leaves, which may have been its roost.

By this time I had made an assumption, based on my past experience with wintering hummingbirds: I imagined the thrush would stay for the winter and show itself often. But I never saw it again.

Kent came back the next morning, 30 Dec, with scope and camera and remained all day without finding the bird. He likewise had no luck during a few hours on 31 Dec and 1 Jan. At that point he urged me to make notes right away, and I did.

In early January, Derb Carter and Harry LeGrand searched the sighting location along my driveway as well as nearby roadsides with similar moist woods and plenty of fruiting cedars, but they never found the bird.

Varied Thrushes are year-round residents of the Pacific Northwest and summer residents of a large part of Alaska. In winter they are most common in relatively wet woods (Root 1988) from coastal Alaska southward into California (George 2000). But Varied Thrushes are known to wander widely in winter, especially to the upper Midwest and northeast Atlantic coast (Keith 1968), and the species had been documented in all the Canadian provinces except Newfoundland and in all continental United States except Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and North Carolina (DeSante and Pyle 1986; AOU 1998)—until this bird turned up on my driveway. South Carolina, for example, has at least two accepted sightings (South Carolina Bird Records Committee 1996). And now North Carolina has one, too. The North Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted the written details of this sighting, the first for North Carolina, and placed Varied Thrush on the Provisional List, as no photographs were taken (LeGrand et al., 2007).

Acknowledgments

I appreciate the efforts of Derb Carter and Harry LeGrand to find the bird in my neighborhood. I especially thank Kent Fiala for giving me good advice, for locating most of the references, and for having remarkable patience in attempting to find and photograph the bird.

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