

Swainson's Thrush

Zorzal de Swainson
(Spanish)

Catharus ustulatus

Class: Aves
Order: Passeriformes
Family: Turdidae
Genus: Catharus

Distribution

Summer range extends from Alaska in the north, east across Canada and southward to northern United States, and areas of the Pacific coast. They winter in Mexico, Central and South America.

Habitat

This bird prefers dense, coniferous forests across most of its range, especially fir, spruce, and hemlock.

Food

It is omnivorous, eating mostly insects during spring and summer and fruits in fall and winter.

Reproduction

Breeding takes place throughout the boreal region of North America. As with many songbirds they are seasonally monogamous. Males arrive first at the breeding sites.



This species has a large range. Subspecies are divided into Russet-backed and Olive-backed. They use different migratory routes and winter in different areas. The “russet-backed” coastal subspecies migrate down the Pacific coast of North America and winter from Mexico to Costa Rica. The continental birds, “olive-backed” migrate eastwards within North America and then travel southwards via Florida to winter from Panama to central and northwestern South America.

Habitat preference varies between the two subspecies with seasonal activity; summer breeding, migration and wintering. Russet-backed most typically nests in willow-alder thickets, while the Olive-backed prefers young conifers. Nests are usually near water. They are less particular during migration, dense undergrowth being the main requirement. They winter in primary and secondary forests.

Beetles, caterpillars and ants are the principle insect prey. A variety of berries are consumed. They forage mainly on the forest floor. They occasionally hawk aerial insects.

Males initially drive off the arriving females. However since females show an unusually high degree of between-year fidelity to their nest sites they persist and pairs often re-form, repeating the pair-bonding process. Mating occurs. An open cup nest is built by the female on a horizontal branch with dense brush cover. It takes her four days. She carefully lines it with grasses and rootlets. One to five eggs (usually four) speckled, blue eggs are laid and incubated for ten to fourteen days by the female.

Development

Hatchlings are altricial; at birth they are quite helpless. They have only sparse down. Both parents tend their baby birds in the nest.

Characteristics

This is a medium-sized thrush 16-18 cm in length. Wingspan is 29-31 cm. Weight is 23-45 g. The white-dark-white under wing pattern is a characteristic of *Catharus* thrushes.

Adaptations

Nest sites are chosen in thickets with high level of concealment by shrubs and forbs. It is heard more often than seen. It uses a variety of foraging techniques. It is an opportunistic feeder.

Status/Threats

Globally secure but declining throughout much of its range. It has become extirpated from parts of its historic range. Logging and fragmentation of forests both north and south.

Sightings at Caño Palma

Both parents feed the chicks. They are fed mostly insects, supplemented by berries. The nestling period lasts 10–12 days. The adults are protective of the nest site. They use alarm calls and countercalls, rapidly repeated. They make long distraction flights away from the nest. They also bounce from branch to branch within a few metres of the nest, often with food in their bills.

The sexes are similar. It is distinguished from other spotted thrushes by its eye-ring and buffy face. They are brown on the upperparts. The underparts are white with brown on the flanks; the breast is lighter brown with darker spots. The “russet-backed” has more reddish plumage and a slightly different song. It also has a slightly thinner eye-ring. The song is a series of flute-like notes spiraling upwards. It is the only woodland thrush whose song goes up in pitch.

The nest is very well constructed. It is a compact cup made from small twigs, plant stems, bark shred, moss and mud. The inner lining contains lichens, skeletonized leaves, fine grasses and rootlets. Both parents are very protective of the developing chicks. Although an extremely melodious species, if approached, even from some distance it will stop singing and drop down to hide itself in thick underbrush. Thickets provide concealment as well as good foraging. It pecks and gleans but also aerial lunges, hovers and catches flies. In the south they follow army ant swarms. Fat is accumulated prior to migration. During migration different habitat types are used to drop down into to refuel.

A very short breeding season means a very narrow window of opportunity for reproduction. Nest predation is quite high. Heavy spring flooding of the understory destroys nesting habitats. Disturbances by recreational activities on waterways or by vehicles using roads along waterways are detrimental to reproduction. Migrants are as vulnerable in summer as in winter due to loss of forest habitat.

This is sighted fairly frequently within the compound area and more often across the canal. One was observed being eaten by a green vine snake.

References Extracted Dec.2008

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