



Thrushes

Of the more than 120 species of thrushes (family Turdidae) worldwide, there are eight species that are regularly observed in Pennsylvania, six nesting species and two passage migrants. Thrushes are songbirds that have thin bills, plump bodies, and strong legs. They often forage on the ground, searching in leaf litter and on lawns for insects and other invertebrates such as spiders, earthworms, and snails. They eat berries in late summer, in fall, and (if they do not migrate south) in winter. Juveniles' spotted breasts help camouflage them. Thrushes are important dispersal agents for wild fruit- and berry-producing shrubs and trees. Hawks, falcons, owls, foxes, mink, and house cats prey on thrushes. Blue jays, grackles, crows, raccoons, weasels, squirrels, chipmunks, and snakes eat eggs and nestlings. Except for the eastern bluebird and the American robin, Pennsylvania thrushes are forest birds. Although often associated with human habitations, the American robin also lives in wooded habitats.

Many thrushes sing complex mellifluous songs that delight human listeners. Thrushes have the special adaptation of two voice boxes that allow individuals to vocalize two notes independently allowing simultaneous melodies in their songs. Many thrushes sing not only in the early morning, but also at dusk. These choruses can be memorable events to anyone visiting Penn's Woods in the evening. The spotted forest thrushes of the genus *Catharus* are sometimes called "nightingale-thrushes" because of their vocal abilities. Most thrushes build open cup-shaped nests secured to branches of low trees and shrubs. Some robins nest on building ledges and other flat surfaces; bluebirds choose tree cavities or artificial nesting boxes; and hermit thrushes and veeries often nest on the ground. Females do most of the actual nest construction. The typical clutch is four or five eggs. All of the species breeding in the Northeast lay pale blue or blue-green eggs. Females do most of the incubating, and both parents feed the young.

Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*)

This familiar species nests across much of the East and winters south to Nicaragua. A bluebird is six inches long and weighs about an ounce. Males have a vivid blue back and wings and a ruddy breast while the females have a more muted blue-gray back and less vividly colored breast. When not nesting,



eastern
bluebird

bluebirds wander in small feeding flocks sometimes with house finches and other songbirds. They favor semi-open habitats: orchards, pastures, hayfields, fence lines, cut over or burned areas, forest clearings, open woodlots, and suburban gardens and parks. The song consists of three or more soft, melodious and mellow whistled notes ("tury cherwee, cheye-ley," as one observer has rendered it). Bluebirds eat crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, caterpillars, and many other insects, and they take spiders, centipedes, earthworms, and snails. Often they sit on a low perch, then flutter down to catch prey from vegetation or the ground. In fall and winter they turn to fruits, including those of sumac, dogwood, Virginia creeper, poison ivy, pokeweed, elderberry, wild cherry, bittersweet, honeysuckle, and wild grape. On sunny or warm winter days, they can turn back to insects for food if they are available.

The courting male sings to the female and flutters close to her with his wings and tail spread; he may pass food to her. Mated pairs preen each other's feathers. A study in New York found that bluebird territories used for mating, nesting, and feeding averaged over five acres. Bluebirds nest in abandoned woodpecker holes, tree cavities, hollow fence posts, and artificial boxes put up for them by humans. Bluebirds may face stiff competition for these sites from European starlings, house sparrows, tree swallows, and house wrens, all of which

have been known to kill adult bluebirds. Bluebirds tend to like more open situations for nesting than competing house wrens, informing us as to the better locations for nest box placement. The female builds a loose nest inside the cavity out of grasses and weed stalks, sometimes lining a central cup with feathers or animal hair. Early nesters, bluebirds lay first clutches by late March or early April and second clutches by early June. Some pairs will nest three times in a season. The three to six eggs (usually four or five) are pale blue and unmarked. The female incubates them for about two weeks. Both parents feed the nestlings. After about eighteen days, fledglings leave the nest. Second and third clutches will usually have one fewer egg than a first clutch produced by the same pair.

Bluebirds are permanent residents in the southern parts and lower elevations of their range. In winter, bluebirds from northern areas and higher elevations may shift southward and to the valleys. In mild winters you may see many bluebirds in the agricultural valleys of central Pennsylvania. If they ever left their nesting ground, bluebirds return to their breeding grounds in March and April, welcomed as harbingers of spring by winter weary rural folk. Bluebirds nest statewide in Pennsylvania, avoiding deep woods and wooded ridges. The population of *Sialia sialis* probably peaked around 1900, when farmland covered two thirds of the state. The number of bluebirds waned for many years thereafter as unprofitable acres were abandoned and grew back up in forest, but bluebird numbers have risen over the last several decades thanks to thousands of bluebird boxes put up by humans.

Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*)

Named for its call, this woodland thrush has a reddish brown head, back, and tail and a faintly spotted breast. It breeds in southern Canada and in the northern United States, south in the Appalachians to Georgia. In Pennsylvania, where it arrives in May, it is most common in the northern half of the state, especially on the Pocono Plateau. The veery favors damp deciduous forest with a dense undergrowth of shrubs and ferns. Veery pairs often nest in streamside shrubby woods and swampy areas. Where its range overlaps that of the wood thrush and hermit thrush, the veery will be found in wetter, younger woods. Its song is a delicate, flutelike *da vee ur, vee ur, veer, veer* that cascades down the musical scale. The beautiful song has an echoing quality that is described indelicately as sounding like somebody whistling into a sewer pipe. They sing not only in the morning but also at dusk. The veery has a distinctive "veer" or "phew." Mainly a ground forager, the veery feeds on insects (60 percent of its diet) and fruit (40 percent). In an Ontario study, individual territories averaged slightly more than half an acre.

The female builds a nest in a dense shrub near ground level or on the ground itself, often hiding it in vegetation at the base of a bush or small tree or in a brushpile. She lays three to five (usually four) pale blue eggs and incubates them for ten to 14 days. Brown-headed cowbirds lay eggs in the nests of veeries, they make no attempt to remove the eggs and raise the cowbird(s) along with their own young. Chipmunks sometimes

prey on eggs and nestlings. The male helps to rear the brood, and the young leave the nest ten to twelve days after hatching. Veeries migrate at night. A recent study has clarified that veeries winter in central and southern Brazil, rather than a broader area in South America as previously suspected.

Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*)

This shy, elusive bird breeds in spruce forests and in alder and willow thickets in northern Canada and Alaska. Gray-cheeked thrushes pass through Pennsylvania in May and again in September and October. They forage on the ground, usually in dense woods, and birdwatchers must be both stealthy and patient to catch a glimpse. They winter in South America.

The closely-related Bicknell's Thrush (*Catharus bicknelli*) has been separated as a distinct species from the more widespread gray-cheeked thrush. Nesting in mountain-tops of New York, New England and in Maritime Canada, it probably passes through the state annually but is rarely distinguished from the very similar gray-cheeked thrush. It nests as close as the Catskill Mountains of New York and winters in the West Indies, primarily the island of Hispaniola.

Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*)

A common migrant seen in woodlots and parks during spring and fall, this shy thrush nests regularly in Pennsylvania, in a scattering of northern tier counties. It breeds in New England, across Canada and Alaska, and in the U. S. Northwest. The Swainson's thrush (also called the olive-backed thrush) can be distinguished by bold buffy rings that surround its dark eyes. The melodious call features flute like phrases going up the scale. They also can be detected by their call notes that sound like dripping water or the call of a spring peeper. Swainson's thrushes inhabit coniferous woods, generally spruce but also hemlock, where it nests in shrubby trees two to ten feet above ground. Like the other thrushes, it feeds mainly on insects and berries but is more likely to engage in flycatching than other thrushes. Swainson's thrushes winter in tropical forests of Central and South America. Remarkably, the Swainson's thrushes that nest in Alaska and western Canada

veery

