



THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

FEBRUARY 2011 — No. 495

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Great Back Yard Bird Count

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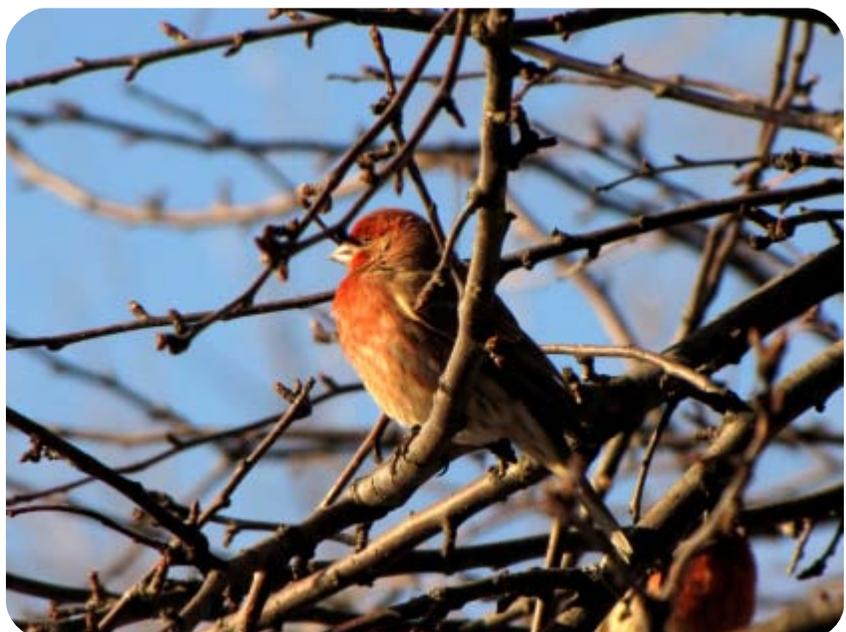
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Great Back Yard Bird Count

Be a Citizen-Scientist with a mere 15 minutes of effort this weekend - you can't get a better deal than that! See page 6 for more details about the Great Back Yard Bird Count.



*Above - a Front Yard Northern Mockingbird still counts! Photo by Gene Denzel.
Below: Back Yard House Finch - photo by Rod Potter*



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NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

The Bulletin is published 9 times per year, from September to May inclusive, by the Richmond Hill Naturalists, and is mailed free to members. The Bulletin is the official publication of the Richmond Hill Naturalists, a non-profit organization the objectives of which are to stimulate public interest in natural history and to encourage the preservation of our natural areas.

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Deadlines: The editor encourages submissions from any member on any topic related to nature or conservation, and in particular, any issue that might be of interest or concern to members of this club. e-mail: editor@rhnaturalists.ca Deadlines are the 2nd Thursday of each month.

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Don't forget to Renew your Membership! Your membership fee helps pay for our monthly hall rental, website registration, speakers, printing and postage for the Bulletin (all Website and Bulletin contributions and editing are on a strictly volunteer basis), and special events. Please renew by clicking on the "Membership" link on the website at rhnaturalists.ca or at the monthly General Meeting. A single membership is \$30; get a membership for the whole family for only \$35.

Carden Nature Festival

Online registration is now available for the Carden Nature Festival, June 3-5 2011. Don't delay: sign up for your favourite events now before it's too late! There are more than 130 activities scheduled to suit everyone from the lawn chair birdwatcher to wilderness explorers and plenty in between for adults and kids, but space IS LIMITED!

Go to <http://www.cardenguide.com/index.php/carden-nature-festival/registration> (or just www.cardenguide.com and follow the links)

Please enter the Goup Number code 0511. If at least 12 adult members of the Richmond Hill Naturalist Club attend the festival, the Club will get a very significant rebate for a portion of the costs. Many thanks to the Couchiching Conservancy for sponsoring and organizing the festival and promoting this unique and beautiful part of Ontario -- and for sharing so generously.

Some events are free, most cost \$6.00, per person including children, some cost more. A weekend pass is \$25.00 per person. If at least 12 people from the Richmond Hill Naturalist participate the group rebate to our club would be 25% of the total or \$6.25 per weekend pass.

Coming Events



Thursday, February 17, 2011 at 7:30pm - General Meeting. Speaker John Pisapio, Management Biologist, Ministry of Natural Resources will speak on BioDiversity. The meeting will take place at the Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall. 10066 Yonge St., North of Major Mackenzie Dr., West side. For info contact Marianne Yake at 905-883-3047, or visit www.RHNaturalists.ca.



Tuesday, March 8, 2011 at 7:30pm - Executive Meeting. McConaghy Centre. All are welcome. Executive positions available include: Secretary, Environment, Publicity, Events. Come out to the Exec meeting and see what you think!



Wednesday, March 9, 2011 at 7:30pm - Bird Group - Lincoln and Vesper Sparrow Nighthawk - hosted by Martin Chen. 398 Highcliff Dr, Thornhill. All are welcome. Please rsvp to 905-709-0246.



Thursday, March 17, 2011 at 7:30pm - General Meeting, Speaker, Lev Frid, "The other end of migration: the lives of Neotropical migrants". The meeting will take place at the Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall. 10066 Yonge St., North of Major Mackenzie Dr., West side. For info contact Marianne Yake at 905-883-3047, or visit www.RHNaturalists.ca.

Please note: Richmond Hill Naturalists welcomes anyone to volunteer as an outing leader. Contact trips@rhnaturalists.ca if you would like to organize or promote an outing.



Sunday Feb 27, 9:30 am Oak Ridges Corridor Park Hike – Join with members of the Oak Ridges Trail Association (ORTA) to walk the 8 k length of the Oak Ridges Corridor Park trail at a moderate pace. Hike or bring snowshoes or icers depending on the weather. Also bring snack and hot drinks. Note: You do not have to be an ORTA member to participate – all are welcome. Meet at the trail parking lot on Old Colony Rd just west of Bayview Ave. For more information, contact the hike leader Mahnoosh Aminian @ 647-968-4533. mahnoosh30@yahoo.com



Wednesday March 2, 7:00 – 9:00 pm, Sharon Garden Party – Introduction to Permaculture – Join the York Region Food Network for an intriguing garden seminar to introduce permaculture. This is the practice of producing food, energy etc. using ways that will not deplete the earth's resources. Admission is pay what you can (\$15.00 suggested) and refreshments will be served. Sharon Temple, 18974 Leslie St. For more information visit: <http://yrfn.ca/>



Saturday March 19, 9:30 am - Jefferson Forest Hike 1– Join with members of the Oak Ridges Trail Association (ORTA) for a 3.8 k walk at a moderate pace in beautiful Jefferson Forest. This will be a preview of the new ORTA main trail that will be established through these 400 acres of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority property. There are steep hills along the way and you need good footwear. Meet at the Sunset Beach parking lot on Bethesda SdRd just west of Bayview Ave. Opportunity for a group lunch after the hike. Note: You do not have to be an ORTA member to participate – all are welcome. For more information contact the hike leader Rhys Beak at 905-237-1826.

Vaughan Council Approves Resolution to Preserve Concord West Greenspace

We are delighted to hear that our neighbours, the Save Concord West group, have won the first step in their struggle to save their own tiny slice of greenspace.

If you didn't know about this struggle, it concerns the last remaining greenspace in an old neighbourhood south of Highway 7, west of the Upper Don River, and east of Concord West. The park they have enjoyed for many decades is home to the endangered Common Nighthawk and Blandings Turtles. A gem in its own right, it has also provided a safe pedestrian connection between the Concord West Community and the Bartley Smith Greenway/Langstaff Ecopark. Until the Powers That Be put in the 407 and removed a local bridge over the Upper Don, residents could walk through this park and indeed all the way from the Glen Shields neighbourhood to Finch Avenue via Glen Shields Park and Lord Ross Park. Now owned by the Ontario Realty Corporation, their little slice of heaven has been fenced off, the bridge removed, and a commuter train station with parking lot planned.

The Concord West Seniors Club began a campaign to present an alternative location for the train station that would serve the area just as well without further destroying what little greenspace is left. They went to Vaughan Council on Feb 15 and, in part due to some help from the Richmond Hill Naturalists and others with a letter-writing campaign, Vaughan Municipal Council unanimously accepted a resolution in support of the community's struggle to preserve the Concord West Greenspace. The group had gone before Vaughan Council to ask



Blandings Turtle from the Concord West Greenspace, photo by Archie Haslauer, a long-time resident of Concord West and a Director of the Concord West Ratepayers Association

Visit the Save Concord West website for many more photographs of the park and the story of the group's battle to save this little patch of green.

<http://saveconcordwest.wordpress.com>

the town to request the Province to transfer the parkland to the TRCA, to move the proposed transit hub from the park site to rail lands north of #7, to properly evaluate the group's Alternative Plan, and restore access for the local residents to their park. The vote was recorded and was unanimously in favour of Save Concord West's resolution.

Keep up the momentum, Concord West! Your journey is just beginning.

Toadflax from Concord West Greenspace



Observatory Lands Subdivision Plan Revealed

The would-be developers of the David Dunlap Observatory lands pitched their first salvo to a packed and mostly hostile crowd at Richmond Hill Town Council offices on Wednesday evening, Feb 9. The council meeting was billed as "A Request for Comments - Official Plan Amendment and Zoning By-law Amendment and draft plan of subdivision applications". And yes there were comments.

The audience wasn't buying it but town councillors couldn't completely duck the toss. After hearing something over two dozen articulate and heartfelt delegations nearly all opposed to the development, several councillors intimated that Town Council cannot outright reject development on the site without having a lot of ammunition to fight the developer at the OMB.

Council voted to receive all comments and forward to Staff.

The Corsica/Metrus representatives presented the plan of subdivision with a virtual drive along proposed roads. A gazebo standing in for the old Radio Shack, wide boulevards that follow the old farm tracks, and a low-density subdivision of houses built with red brick reminiscent of the red-brick Administration Building, were Corsica/Metrus's nod to the cultural heritage of the site. We were somewhat surprised that none of the 833 proposed units sported a white dome, but perhaps that will come in the revisions that Town Staff will certainly request from the developer before the plan is approved.

In the developer's proposal, a

single line of trees replaces the woodlot along Bayview; the woods immediately surrounding the Dome and west of the gatekeeper's house remain; part of the experimental tree plantation that runs perpendicular to Hillside is kept, but the rest of the woods have been replaced with houses, roads, and two stormwater ponds. From Metrus' viewpoint, it would seem they are making a huge and unprecedented sacrifice in that they are not building houses on nearly a third of the entire property.

One councillor suggested that many of the audience members live in a Metrus-built home. That is a probability that only proves the difficulty of trying to stop still more Metrus homes from being built on any one particular piece of ground that the company owns.

Watch for the next inning when Metrus comes back with their revisions based on Town Staff's suggestions.

Volunteers needed for Grassland Bird Survey

from Bird Studies Canada

March 18th is the deadline to sign up as a volunteer surveyor for BSC's Grassland Bird Survey (GBS) beginning in Spring, 2011. The GBS is a collaborative effort of Bird Studies Canada, Wildlife Preservation Canada, and the Canadian Wildlife Service to locate Loggerhead Shrike (migrans subspecies) while at the same time collecting information on other grassland bird species associated with shrike habitat. The survey results will help to improve our understanding of bird species composition in

Ontario's remaining grasslands.

Grassland birds have demonstrated more significant and widespread population declines than any other group of North American birds. The GBS will focus on grassland habitats in the key breeding areas of the Loggerhead Shrike including the Carden, Napanee and Smiths Falls limestone plains, the area around Pembroke/Renfrew, Grey and Bruce Counties in the Bruce Peninsula, and Manitoulin Island. Participants will be asked to complete a survey of a suite of grassland bird species compiled based on North American migratory bird population trends as well as results of the second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Surveyors will conduct 15-minute roadside surveys along assigned 'sites' from which high quality, grassland habitat is visible.

If you are interested in participating in this project and would like more information, please contact the GBS Coordinator, Erica Lagios, at Wildlife Preservation Canada, 519-836-9314 or 1-800-956-6608 (toll free), or by email: gbs@wildlifepreservation.ca.



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Great Back Yard Bird Count Feb 18-21

The Great Back Yard Bird Count is this weekend, Feb 18-21.

This is your opportunity to take a minimum of 15 minutes chosen at any time over the four days, to check out what birds are in your yard and report your findings. The continent wide count creates an instantaneous snapshot of birdlife across the U.S. and Canada.

At www.birdcount.ca, you can enter the highest number of each species seen at any one time during the four days and watch as the tallies grow across the continent. Coordinated by Bird Studies Canada, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Audubon Society, the four-day count typically records more than 10 million observations.

Last year's Ontario participants reported 134 species, from a single Gray Cheeked Rosy Finch to 26,541 Canada Geese. Combined with other data, the GBBC event provides valuable information, according to Dr. Janis Dickinson, director of Citizen Science at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Dickinson noted that past GBBC counts showed a drop in reports of American Crows since 2003, coincident with some of the first widespread outbreaks of West Nile virus in the U.S. Once ranked among the top 4 or 5 most frequently reported species, crows are still among the top 10 birds reported in the Great Backyard Bird Count but they have dropped in ranking since 2003. This "signal" is consistent with data from the more intensive Breeding Bird Survey, as well as studies demonstrating declines of 50-75% in crow populations in some states after outbreaks of West Nile virus.

Maps from the count have also captured the dramatic spread Eurasian Collared-Doves.



Backyard Cardinal - photo by Sharon and Jim Bradley

Introduced to the Bahamas in the 1970s, the species was reported in just 8 states during the 1999 GBBC. A decade later, it was reported in 39 states and

Canadian provinces. So take a close look at those Mourning Doves in the back yard this year!



Winter Robin - photo by Jim and Sharon

In other news...

Consumer Survey Blues -- or are they Greens now?

by Denise Potter

Recently received in the mail: a consumer survey offering me an opportunity (no mention of probability) of winning Five thousand smackeroos in exchange for filling out the survey.

The lengthy list of questions wanted to find out what diseases and ailments members of the household suffered from, what brands of contact lens cleaner they used, what household cleaning products and soaps and what brands of convenience foods, but what I thought most interesting was that every category had a "green" option: Do you prefer Tide, sunlight, or "Green" laundry soap? Do you purchase SaniFlush or a "Green" toilet bowl cleaner? What model of car do you drive -- or do you take the bus?

It was very clearly trying to find out how much effort the big corporations should be putting into marketing green products. Are they losing market share to "eco" products and if so, what do they need to do to get that market share back?

As we strive to live more simply and sustainably, buy unprocessed foods as much as possible and walk more...will we be allowed to get away with it or are we just going to find ourselves buying "Organic Naturally Raised Chicken Nuggets", fourteen pairs of \$200 shoes for different types of walking and running, and perhaps paying a premium for "eco" white vinegar and baking soda for washing?

National Sweater Day

You might have overlooked National Sweater Day on February 17th. The cozy protest asks everyone to turn down the thermostat by 3 degrees on February 17th and throw on a funky, quirky sweater to show support for the planet. For more information about this program http://wwf.ca/takeaction/sweater_day/. Note from the editor: I'm totally in support of this. But count me out of National Bikini Day when summer comes around...

2010 Ontario Nature Conservation Awards

Submitted by Lauren Wright, Ontario Nature
The Ontario Nature Conservation Awards recognize excellence by honouring individuals, groups, government agencies and corporations who have worked to protect nature in Ontario. All Conservation Award recipients

will be honoured at Ontario Nature's Annual General Meeting at the Ganaraska Forest Centre on June 11, 2011. For more information and to download a nomination form, visit www.ontarionature.org/act/conservation_award/. The deadline for nominations is March 31, 2011.

2011 Youth Summit for Biodiversity & Sustainable Living

Submitted by Sarah Hedges, Ontario Nature
Circle September 23-25 on your calendar. This is the date of the 2011 Youth Summit for Biodiversity. Our newly-formed Youth Council will be hosting the Summit this year and once again, we will have a great roster of conservation-focused workshops and activities. Please contact Sarah Hedges at sarahh@ontarionature.org.



Looking for Bohemian Waxwings? A large flock of 60+ Bohemian Waxwings has been seen at Seneca King Campus this winter. The photo above clearly shows the cinnamon brown undertail that distinguishes these birds from their Cedar Waxwing cousins. These birds, along with a pair of cedar waxwings were also captured on video. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSO9Go6EJjk>

News from Bird Studies Canada

International Year of Forests
It's official...2011 is the United Nations International Year of Forests. Deforestation of tropical rainforests continues to be the highest threat to species. Estimates put the current losses of forest at over 10 million hectares per year, which is about the land area of a medium-sized country like Egypt, Bolivia, or Tanzania. As things now stand, few tropical forests will survive to the end of the 21st century.

"The world's forests are not only essential to life in all its diversity but also to achieving mankind's biggest goals, such as reducing poverty, combating climate change, and attaining sustainable development," says Dr. Marco Lambertini, BirdLife International's Chief Executive.

The BirdLife Partnership has numerous projects to conserve and restore degraded forest ecosystems and promote sustainable forest use. BirdLife's work is at the centre of global efforts to conserve and restore forests so that the profusion of life they contain and the vital services they provide are not lost to the world forever.

An exciting new initiative is BirdLife's Forests of Hope Programme which aims to

prevent deforestation or promote restoration of natural forest at up to 20 sites covering at least five million hectares of tropical forest by 2015. The fundamental belief being that threatened biodiversity is not lost and can be saved, and degraded forests can be restored. Conserved or restored forests can continue to provide the services that local communities and society world-wide depend upon.

How Vulnerable Are North America's Birds?

A recent study carried out by scientists from Canada, Mexico, and the United States, including several BirdLife Partners, found that of the 882 native landbirds shared across borders, 17 per cent (148 species) need immediate conservation action.

The report, Saving Our Shared Birds, an initiative of Partners in Flight, assessed the status of all 882 shared landbirds, and used their findings to rank the vulnerability of each species.

The 148 species identified as most vulnerable include:

- * 44 species having limited distributions
- * 80 tropical species which depend on deciduous, highland, and evergreen forests in Mexico

* 24 species that occur in temperate-zone forests, grasslands, and arid land habitats during the breeding season

Hawk-eagles, Wood Partridges, Cyanolyca Jays, and Macaws are some of the birds included in the list of 148 species. As is the case for biodiversity, habitat loss is the greatest threat to these birds.

The report concludes with six steps that Canada, Mexico, and the United States must take to reverse the trend of declining North American landbird populations.

Rouge Park Family Day Walk
Monday, February 21, 10am-12pm

Learn about Rouge Park on this free 5km walk with leader Marie.

Family Friendly: Energetic kids up for this distance and wee ones in carriers welcome. Dog Friendly too.

Meeting Point: Roadside parking area by the Rouge Valley Conservation Centre, 1749 Meadowvale Road, north of Sheppard Avenue East - opposite the Toronto Zoo. TTC bus 86A via the Toronto Zoo.

Please visit http://www.rougepark.com/hike/walks_february_2011.php if you need more info on our meeting point and to get a google map.

Dress for the weather, wear boots for trail walking and please arrive about 10 minutes early.

If you would like to RSVP, we'd love to know we can expect you. hike@rougepark.com

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Name that thrush!

Hint 1: See the story on Page 10
- Spotted Thrush Mystery

Hint 2: Tends to occupy the
middle layer of the forest

Hint 3: Usually arrives in Ontario
in early May

Bonus Question: What is a group
of thrushes called?

Answer on page 10...

Photo by Gene Denzel



Wine and Birds in Niagara

files from Joe Agg and Denise Potter

Several Richmond Hill Naturalists have made the trek to the Niagara Falls area recently.

The Potters and the McKenzie-Reed clans went to Niagara just before New Year's in search of Gulls and wine and were highly successful on both fronts. A lovely, fruity peach wine paired beautifully with sightings of one Little Gull amid thousands of Bonaparte's Gull, with sprinklings of Lesser Black-Backed and Greater Black-Backed Gulls, a Slaty-Backed, and Iceland and Glaucous Gulls (among the tens of thousands of Ring-Billed and Herring Gulls). We were also fortunate enough to find the Tufted Titmouse Joe Agg mentions below.

Joe Agg had a great experience in January sighting Northern Pintail, Black Duck, Tufted Titmouse, Red-Bellied Woodpecker, Red-and White-Breasted Nuthatches, and a number of commonly found birds such as Blue Jays and Cardinals. "We were quickly able



Denise Potter, Theresa McKenzie and Glenn Reed leaning out over the Niagara Gorge searching for Slaty-Backed Gulls. Note the gritted teeth -- it may have been just a little chilly.

to hand feed many of them," Joe writes. "The bird aviary is fabulous except it mainly houses tropical birds including the worlds largest pigeon. He went into a very elaborate mating performance with a young child. I think the kid was a little frightened. I love the Niagara area and spent two wonderful evenings along the river in the

softly falling snow. The hotel was quiet until Friday when many families showed up." If you prefer peace and quiet, and can visit during the week, do so!

Maybe we can get Joe to organize a group trip to the Falls. If interested, let him know!

Spotted Thrush Mystery

by Denise Potter

Ethereal music woke us just before dawn. Amazed, we crawled out of our tent into the moonlit mist, trying to fathom where the eerily beautiful fluting came from. It was late June and we were camping in an almost empty campground in Algonquin Park, far from people or electricity. The faerie music surrounded us, filtering through the trees, sometimes seemingly within arms reach, sometimes from far away. Yet even as the sky grew lighter we saw nothing at all. As we walked along the path, the music followed us, only fading away as the sun rose above the curve of the earth.

Later we went through books and tapes and figured out that the mystical music was the dawn song of a little brown bird, the Hermit Thrush. Its mottled brown and rust colouring fades into invisibility in the dim forest edges where it dwells, and even at high noon it may be little more than a shadow floating from branch to branch, usually not far from the ground.

That magical morning was one of the moments that launched us into the passion known as birdwatching, which to us is simply an ache to understand some small part of the diverse life around us.

Yet we find that if it's not actually singing, it's not that easy to know the lightly-spotted thrush IS a Hermit Thrush, or one of its close cousins the Swainson's Thrush or the Gray-Cheeked. So here, in preparation for spring migration...which really is



Which spotted thrush is this? Note the lack of facial markings. Another hint: this bird tends to skulk deep in thickets. Thanks to Glenn Reed for this lovely closeup of a bird captured at the Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory.

coming soon!...are some pointers for telling them apart.

1. The Hermit thrush characteristically jerks its tail up quickly and lowers it slowly, while flicking its wings, almost every time it lands in a new spot.
2. Migration. Hermits are known to breed in Southern Ontario. Hermits are the first of the three to arrive, showing up as early as March, and the last to leave, heading for southern parts in late October and November. Some have even been known to stay the winter. Gray-Cheeked and Swainson's will typically arrive in early May and will keep on going. They may start heading south again in August and September.
3. Eye Ring (or not); reddish tail (or not). The Hermit thrush has a rich brown to gray-brown head and back and a reddish tail, a complete white eye-ring and an indistinct white lore (eyebrow). Swainson's has a far more obvious, full buffy eye ring and

distinct buffy lore, appears spectacled from close-up; and looks pale overall from the front compared to the back of the head; usually Swainson's is olive-drab or olive-gray-backed with very little reddishness in the back or tail. Gray-Cheeked has a minimal white eyering, a gray lore, and virtually no contrast in colour between the face and the back of the head. Gray-Cheeked is essentially gray, and plain, with no reddishness

at all.

4. Habit: the Hermit may flit from low branch to low branch as it hunts insects or hop briskly along the ground like a robin; it is often found in forest edge habitat and on roadsides; the Gray-Cheeked is more inclined to stay low to the ground or on the ground and more hidden, deeper in thickets and forest -- and is therefore perhaps less often seen by birders. Swainson's spends more time than the others in the middle layer of the forest, but also hunts on the ground.

All the spotted thrushes have beautiful songs, but I think none are as haunting as the song of the Hermit Thrush. It is said that they sing only on their breeding territory, and if this is true then we are truly fortunate in southern Ontario. Find your way to a dry forest edge, before the dawn on a June morning, and if you are lucky you too may find yourself surrounded by the song of the Hermit Thrush.

Bird on Page 9 - Swainson's thrush ("the spectacled thrush"). Bird on Page 10 - Gray-Cheeked Thrush.

Answer to Quiz Question on Page 9: a Mutation of Thrushes: Extra points to anyone who can tell us WHY..