

ABOUT THE COVER: GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH

The Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*) is the least observed of the thrushes routinely seen in Massachusetts. It is usually classed as a very uncommon and inconspicuous migrant, although until the early 1970s a few nested on Mount Greylock, and small populations nest at high altitudes on the mountains of the northern New England states and New York. In spring the thrushes begin arriving in the second week of May and are on their nesting grounds by the beginning of June; in fall they pass through Massachusetts in the last half of September and early October. They can be separated from all the other thrushes, except the Swainson's Thrush, by their uniformly olive-brown upper parts, and from the Swainson's by the gray cheeks and lack of a prominent buffy eye-ring. The sexes appear similar in all plumages.

The taxonomy of this species is in a state of flux. Currently the smaller, New England breeding population is considered a subspecies (*C. m. bicknelli*), although the recent evidence outlined in the article by Rimmer and coauthors in this issue of *Bird Observer* (see pages 84-89) suggests that this population is in all probability reproductively isolated from the more northern *C. m. minimus*, and thus should be considered a distinct species.

While *bicknelli* nests mostly on mountain slopes above three thousand feet in New England, New York, and the Maritime provinces of Canada, *minimus* has a broad breeding range from Siberia and Alaska across northern Canada to Newfoundland, often in dwarf trees and scattered shrubs of the arctic tundra. It is North America's most northern breeding thrush. The two subspecies appear to have different wintering grounds, with *bicknelli* predominantly in the Caribbean, and *minimus* across northern South America as far south as Peru.

The life history of these birds is poorly known, but courtship includes pursuit flights, often accompanied by vocalizations and crest erection and bill gaping. The song is similar to that of a Veery, but more nasal and with a different ending. The nest is usually low or on the ground, cup-shaped, and made of woven bark, grass, weeds, and twigs, with a soft grass lining; *bicknelli* nests often incorporate moss. The three to five eggs are typically pale blue and lightly spotted with brown. Incubation is about two weeks, and two weeks after hatching the young fledge. These thrushes are largely insectivorous in spring and summer, but become largely frugivorous in the fall, specializing in berries. Their insect food includes beetles, flies, ants, and caterpillars. They feed insects to their young.

It seems ironic that the only bird endemic to our area, *bicknelli*, has become extinct as a breeding bird in Massachusetts before it becomes recognized as a full species! We can only hope that the apparent population declines of this enigmatic bird do not continue, and that it will continue to challenge researchers on its rugged mountain breeding grounds into the future. W. E. Davis, Jr.