

ABOUT THE COVER: WOOD THRUSH

The Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*) is considered by many to be our most accomplished songster. As one author put it, the bell-like or flute-like notes of the Wood Thrush's song transform the woods into a "cathedral where peace and serenity abide." The folk names "swamp robin," "wood robin," "song thrush," "bellbird," and "swamp angel" tell us much about the bird's song and habitat. The genus name *Hylocichla* is from the Greek *hyle* meaning "forest," and *cichla* meaning "thrush."

The Wood Thrush is a medium-sized thrush, slightly smaller than an American Robin. It is olive-brown above with a russet upper back, nape, and crown, and has heavy blackish spotting on its white underparts. The sexes are similar in plumage. The Wood Thrush is monomorphic, and its exact systematic position controversial. Different taxonomists suggest that it should be included in the genus *Turdus* (with the American Robin) or *Catharus* (with the Veery and Hermit Thrush) rather than in *Hylocichla*. The Wood Thrush is a summer resident of southern Canada from the Great Lakes east to Nova Scotia, and ranges throughout most of the eastern United States south to northern Florida and east Texas. In Massachusetts it is a common breeding species, although it has declined in the eastern part of the state during the 1980s and 1990s. Wood Thrushes are nocturnal migrants that arrive in early to mid-May, and are nesting by the end of May or early June. They depart from mid-August to mid-September, and are considered uncommon fall migrants. Wood Thrushes winter from central Mexico south to Panama. They show both breeding and winter site fidelity.

Wood Thrushes are seasonally monogamous, often rearing two broods. They prefer low, cool, damp deciduous and mixed deciduous and coniferous forests. The male's magnificent song consists of three parts: (1) a soft *bup bup* which is hard to hear, (2) the 2-10 note typical flute-like *ee-oh-lay*, often containing two notes produced simultaneously, and (3) a terminal trill which often has a ventriloquial effect. Apparently, the second part of the song is largely learned from conspecific males, while the first and third are more innate. Males typically sing from midstory perches in trees, most intensely in the morning, particularly in the half-hour before dawn. They may sing sporadically throughout the day, and then often sing again at dusk. Their song plays the dual role of attracting females and advertising territory ownership to other males. Nuptial displays include low circle-flights by the female, closely followed by the male.

The nest is a bulky cup of weeds, leaves, grass, and mud, lined with rootlets, usually placed in a forked branch of a sapling or small tree. The nest material is collected mainly from the pair's territory, and may include man-made products such as paper or plastic. The female does most of the nest

construction. The clutch consists of 3-4 blue-green eggs which hatch in about two weeks. Only the female has a brood patch, and she alone does the incubation, although the male may bring food to her as well as defend the nest. The female also does all the brooding of the young during the twelve days before fledging, but both parents feed the young.

The diet of this species is largely composed of soil invertebrates, although Wood Thrushes also glean foliage for insects and spiders. They characteristically hop along the forest floor searching the leaf litter for arthropods. Fruit is an important dietary component in the late summer and fall.

Wood Thrushes have recolonized the northeast as the result of reforestation, but Breeding Bird Survey results indicate that numbers have been declining throughout the East since at least the mid-1960s. The reasons for the decline are complex and difficult to assess, but the main causes appear to be a combination of forest fragmentation on the breeding grounds and habitat destruction on the Central American wintering grounds. Forest fragmentation tends to produce a larger percentage of edge habitat in which predation by avian nest predators such as Blue Jays, American Crows, and Common Grackles, and by mammalian predators, is higher. In addition, Brown-headed Cowbird nest parasitism is higher near forest edges than in deep forest, and can significantly affect breeding success. It can only be hoped that wise conservation policies will help slow the decline of Wood Thrush numbers and preserve for us the "cathedrals where peace and serenity abide."

W.E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist

Barry van Dusen is presently acting as production manager and illustrator for an upcoming Massachusetts Audubon Society publication, *Grasslands of Northeastern North America*, by Peter Vickery and Peter Dunwiddie. From September until the end of the year, a selection of Barry's smaller works will be on display at the Cornucopia Gallery at 325 Ayer Road in Harvard, MA (508-772-6701). At the Society of Wildlife Artists exhibition in London, England, this past summer, Barry received a commendation for his water color, "Young Arctic Tern." Barry is still completing a new studio at his home in central Massachusetts, and he looks forward to using the new space to broaden his use of large formats and oil paints.