

# First record of an Aztec Thrush in the United States

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AT 11:20 A.M. ON AUGUST 21, 1977, a baffling thrush-like bird was discovered by Mimi Hoppe Wolf near Boot Spring in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park, Texas. She led the rest of our party (Nicholas S. Halmi, Debbie DeKeyzer and myself) to the spot where she had seen the bird, and we soon located it nearby. We all agreed that it was certainly not of a species familiar to any of us. DeKeyzer photographed the bird while the rest of us took notes on the plumage details. Conditions for viewing were excellent, since the bird was quite tame and lingered within a restricted area. It was still present when we left at 1:20 p.m. While observing the bird, we were joined by Dora Sylvester, Annemarie Boodee and Kirk Hamilton, who also saw it well. The bird remained in the vicinity until at least August 25, when it was studied at length by Peter Scott and Steve West.

After our descent to the Basin, we consulted the Mexican field guides we had available (Davis, 1972, Peterson and Chalif, 1973) and concluded that our bird was most likely an Aztec Thrush (*Ridgwayia pinicola*) in immature plumage (very different from the adults). Further research supported this identification, which was confirmed by Eugene Eisenmann of the American Museum of Natural History from the photographs (color slides on file at the museum). No picture of the immature Aztec Thrush seems to have been published, but Ridgway (1907) has provided a detailed plumage description. Owing to subtle differences, the sex of the bird could not be determined.

## Description:

THE FOLLOWING FIELD MARKS were noted (1) between American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) and Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) in size; (2) bill thrush-like and black, although stouter than an American Robin's and very slightly decurved; (3) head heavily streaked with creamy-white on dark brown, with an indistinct dark line through the eye to the nape, and a suggestion of a shaggy crest, (4) back dark brown with conspicuous white streaking, especially near the scapulars; (5) rump chestnut with upper tail coverts white (forming a narrow band); (6) primaries black with a large rectangular white spot in the middle; secondaries blackish with white spots on the tips and fine white margins; wing coverts with broad buffy-white tips and margins; in flight from above the pattern appeared as a broad band of white across the primaries and a narrower band of white on the trailing edge of the secondaries, and white spotting on the wing coverts; (7) tail relatively short, black with a white band on the tip and white outer feathers; (8) breast and throat off-white with heavy dark streaking; abdomen with sparser dark streaking fading out toward the under tail coverts; (9) legs pinkish.

The bird was strongly attracted to the few rocky depressions in the canyon which held puddles of water. It fed in a robin-like manner by actively flipping over moist leaves and then picking at the debris, often pausing to raise and cock its head. The stance was upright and it moved by hopping. It was very tame, allowing the photographer to approach



*Aztec Thrush, Ridgewayia pinicola, Big Bend National Park, Texas, August 21, 1977. Photo/ Debbie DeKeyser*

within five meters. When disturbed, it flew silently into the lower branches of a tree and sat there well concealed, but soon it descended again to the puddle to feed. The bird did not call or sing.

The Boot Spring area supports a cypress-pine-oak woodland with some deciduous growth. Slopes above the canyon have an open pinyon-juniper-oak association. The elevation of the spring is about 2150 metres (6800 feet). The bird was found in the open, narrow part of the canyon above the spring. The only remaining puddles of water in the higher Chisos Mountains were in this area.

**T**O OUR KNOWLEDGE, this is the first occurrence of the Aztec Thrush in the United States. The species is endemic to the western and central mountain ranges of Mexico, including localities in the states of Chihuahua and Coahuila, which are adjacent to Big Bend (Peterson and Chalif, 1973). The nearest known locality record is that of a specimen collected at 1900 meters elevation (6000 feet) on December 15 (in the non-breeding season) near Ocampo, Coahuila (Friedmann *et al.*), which is only about 220 kilometers from Boot Spring. A series of

mountain ranges bridge the gap from Ocampo to the Chisos, suggesting a pathway for the Aztec Thrush. Possibly a population of *Ridgewayia pinicola* exists in one of the little explored mountain ranges even closer to Big Bend. It seems unlikely that the bird crossed large expanses of inhospitable desert terrain to reach the Chisos from the mountains of western Mexico.

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Nicholas S. Halmi for his extensive help with this report, to Charles Dean Fisher for reviewing my original draft and to Eugene Eisenmann for his prompt confirmation of our identification.

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