

# THE PRACTICED EYE

by Kenn Kaufman and Rick Bowers

Photographs by Rick Bowers

## Curve-billed Thrasher and Bendire's Thrasher



**A**T HOME IN THE DRY COUNTRY OF the West and Southwest are half a dozen species of big ground-foraging songbirds known as thrashers. Their loud and rich songs often make them conspicuous to the ear, but they are usually less apparent to the eye: not only do they wear subtle sandy browns (the colors of desert soil), but they also tend to hide in whatever cover is available.

When scientists were first naming these birds, they threw us a curve. Three of these birds are most notable

for their deeply sickle-shaped bills: California Thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivum*), Crissal Thrasher (*Toxostoma crissale*), and Le Conte's Thrasher (*Toxostoma lecontei*). Ironically, the bird officially known as the Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) shows *less* curvature to the bill than any of the preceding trio. Its bill is curved just a little too much for a "normal" bird. The main challenge in identifying the Curve-billed Thrasher is separating it from an essentially straight-billed bird, Bendire's Thrasher (*Toxostoma bendirei*). This "Practiced Eye" looks at the distinctions between these two subtle songsters.

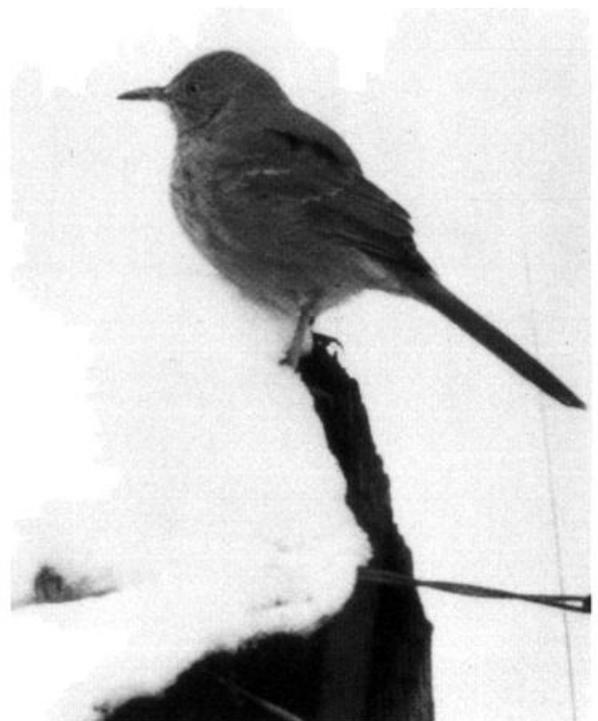
Unlike most of their relatives, Curve-

billed Thrashers are often among the most conspicuous birds in their habitats. Their loud *whit-wheet!* call is heard in a wide variety of desert types, from saguaro-palo verde associations in Arizona to Texas thorn scrub, and even in many residential neighborhoods. An important factor seems to be the presence of cholla cactus, the preferred nest site of the species.

Although Bendire's Thrasher is often found side by side with its Curve-billed cousin, their habitat preferences are not identical. Bendire's seems to avoid most hilly country, and is absent from many desert foothill areas where Curve-billed is common. On the other hand, Curve-billed is missing from



*Curve-billed Thrasher.*



*Bendire's Thrasher.*



*On this Curve-billed Thrasher, photographed in February, the numerous rounded spots on the underparts are less sharply defined and a bit larger than those of Bendire's Thrasher. This is an individual of the race palmeri, from central Arizona; birds farther east, such as those in southern Texas, would tend to show more contrast on the underparts, but the general pattern there would be the same.*

some favored habitats of Bendire's, such as grassland with scattered yuccas, or hedgerows in farming country. Their ranges overlap only in Arizona and New Mexico; beyond this mutual range, Bendire's extends locally west into California and north into Utah, while Curve-billed is found as far east as the Oklahoma panhandle and the central Texas coast. So habitat and range often help in identification.

Bendire's is a quieter bird than Curve-billed Thrasher. It has no attention-getting double whistle; its main callnote is a soft *chuck*. Bendire's earns kudos for its song, however, a sweet melodious caroling that runs on and on, without the start-and-stop jerkiness of Curve-billed's (and most other thrashers') songs. Bendire's often sings from lower, more obscure perches, while Curve-billed tends to burst forth with song from the highest perch available.

While they are singing, the open bills of thrashers can give misleading impressions of shape. But when they are silent, bill shape is an important field character. Both species have fairly long, stout bills, with some curvature to the upper mandible. But the lower edge of the *lower* mandible should be inspected carefully. On typical Bendire's, this lower edge is virtually straight. On typical Curve-billed, this lower edge is strongly curved, and the bill overall looks longer and heavier. Were it not for individual variation, we could identify adults of these two thrashers by bill shape alone; however, some birds look confusingly intermediate in this regard.

Bill color is also worth a look. Typically, Curve-billed Thrasher has an all-black bill, right to the base. Bendire's often looks slightly paler-billed — dark gray instead of black — and the base of the lower mandible is paler still, light tan or flesh. This is often mentioned as a diagnostic mark, but unfortunately, on some Curve-billeds the base of the lower mandible is distinctly pale. Also, both species dig in the soil for food, and their bills are often encrusted with bits of dirt or dust, making actual bill color harder to see.

Although eye color is sometimes mentioned as a field mark, we have had little success with it. It's true that the iris sometimes tends to be more orange in the adult Curve-billed, more yellow in the adult Bendire's (and in



*A Curve-billed Thrasher singing atop a cholla, the cactus in which it usually nests. Presence or absence of wing-bars is not a field mark for these thrashers; this bird is in fairly worn plumage, and any pale tips on the coverts (which would have formed wing-bars) have simply been worn away.*



*Close-up of a Curve-billed Thrasher. Photographed in May, this bird is in fairly worn plumage, but the large rounded spots on its underparts can still be discerned. The bill looks generally heavy and black, but note that the base of the lower mandible looks a little pale — contradicting an often-quoted field mark.*

young birds of both species), but many adults show an intermediate yellow-orange cast to the iris. Practice on these eyes will not do you much good.

On adults in reasonably fresh plumage (mid-autumn to at least early spring), breast pattern is the most reliable field mark. Curve-billed has a pattern of oval-shaped spots, while Bendire's has numerous smaller, darker, arrowhead-shaped marks. As the plumage becomes worn during the spring and early summer, the spots on Curve-billed become blurry and faint, while those of Bendire's become less distinct and often smaller. By mid-to-late summer, both species can look completely unmarked on the underparts.

A particularly thorny problem arises in late spring and summer when juvenile thrashers, not long out of the nest, may be encountered. They are easy to separate from adults, since juveniles will be in very fresh plumage while adults are rather worn at that season; but separating juveniles of the two species from *each other* can be much harder. At this stage, young Curve-billeds may have bills that are shorter and straighter than those of adults. Juveniles of both species have fine dark marks on the upper breast, somewhat similar to the pattern shown by the adult Bendire's. In some cases, such



*Bendire's Thrasher in winter (photographed in December). At this angle, the pattern of the upper breast is partially obscured; but we can still see that the spots there are smaller and darker than the lower ones, which retain something of the "arrowhead" shape.*



*On this Bendire's Thrasher in very fresh plumage (September), the fine dark "arrowhead" spots on the underparts are obvious.*

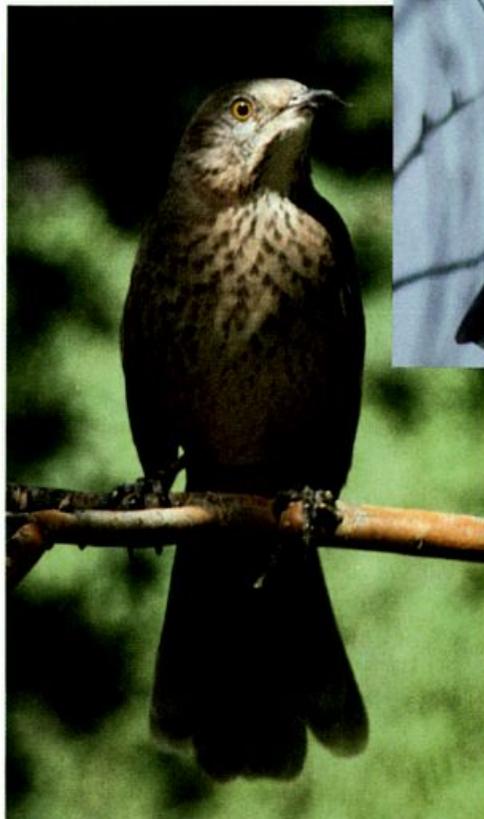
birds must be left unidentified.

A behavioral quirk worth noting is Bendire's frequent habit of cocking its tail up as it runs on the ground. Curve-billed seldom raises its tail above horizontal as it runs, except for brief moments as it stops and the tail swings up and then back down. Of course, this trait is not diagnostic by itself — but the same could be said for most of the field marks discussed here. These two thrashers prove the importance of checking as many field characters as possible, to build a solid identification. ■

*Editor's note: This column is usually written by Kenn Kaufman and illustrated with photographs from VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), the great bird-photo collection at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. For this issue, however, we have taken on a guest co-author and photographer, to take advantage of Rick Bowers' extensive experience with these thrashers.*



*At some angles, bill shape is no help at all. But on this November bird, we can still see that the spots on the upper breast are small, sharply defined, and dark.*



*These two photos make another comparison that should not, but sometimes does, create a problem: Bendire's Thrasher (left) vs. Sage Thrasher (right). These birds are both in fresh plumage; their chest patterns are similar, but the Sage Thrasher shows far more contrast. By mid-summer, when the plumage is worn, the contrast on Sage Thrasher will be reduced — but by then, Bendire's will look practically plain-breasted. At any given season Sage will be the more contrasty bird and a glance at the calendar should be enough to rule out confusion.*