First record of Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush (*Catharus mexicanus*) for the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the first United States record of Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush (*Catharus mexicanus*), a single male that frequented a residential backyard in Pharr, Hidalgo County, Texas from 28 May through 29 October 2004.

Field Encounter

On 28 May 2004, Robert Bates discovered a Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush (*Catharus mexicanus*) in Allen Williams's yard in Pharr, Hidalgo County, Texas at 1745 CDST. It was subsequently observed that evening by Sravanthi Bates, Roy Rodriguez, and Allen Williams. At 1910, the bird began singing the typical advertising song for the species. The bird's plumage was not abraded or unusually worn, and the soft parts were also in good condition, showing no signs of cage wear. The upperparts of the thrush, including the wings and tail, were plain olive-brown with no darker or rufous coloration. The underparts were pale gray with a narrow brownish breast band. The throat was a very pale gray, noticeably lighter than the remainder of the underparts. The bird had a black, rather shaggy crest. The black on the head extended down to include the lores and surrounded the eye. The auriculars and cheeks were dark gray, lighter than the black above and darker than the remainder of the bird's plumage. It also had a bright orange bill and orange eye ring. The eye ring made the black eye look rather large. The legs were long and fairly bright orange, although much duller than the bill. Similar thrush species that were ruled out both during and after the initial discovery of the Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush included Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush (*C. fuscatur*) and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush (*C. aurantiirostris*). Slaty-backed, resident from Costa Rica through the northern Andes, has uniformly dark gray upperparts and white irides (Stiles and Skutch 1989, Ridgley and Greenfield 2001), while Orange-billed, a breeder from northern Mexico through northern South America (Howell and Webb 1995, Hilty 2003), has an overall rufous-brown plumage above and lacks the black crown of Black-capped. The latter has been detected twice in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Papish et al. 1997, S. Cardiff, pers. comm.).

The behavior of the Pharr nightingale-thrush appeared typical for the species: it foraged in the understory and on the ground, fed on fruits of various plant species, and established several advertising perches. The habitat where the it was discovered is a 0.34-ha patch of restored Tamaulipan thorn-scrub comprised of an overstory of Honey Mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) and an understory of 46 species of small trees and other vegetation. During its five-month stay, the nightingale-thrush frequented this small patch of native habitat as well as the neighboring lot, which contains a line of trees composed mainly of Texas Ebony (*Pithecellobium flexicaule*) and a few Anaqua (*Ehretia anacua*), with scattered mesquite and shrubs. From late May through June, the nightingale-thrush was very vocal, singing at varying intervals throughout the day. The intensity of territorial singing decreased during July and early August, when the bird sang only between dawn and mid-morning and then again from late afternoon until dusk. After the bird quit singing, it became very difficult to locate, and it was thought to have departed until it was found again on 19 October and seen regularly through 29 October 2004. During the bird's stay, hundreds of visitors were able to see the nightingale-thrush as it frequented the yard and came to a birdbath on most evenings.

Figure 1. The Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush in Pharr, Texas exhibited plumage and behavior consistent with populations in northern Mexico. The occurrence of the bird fits well with the surmise that it arrived as a spring migrant that "overshot" the northern limits of the species' breeding range. Photograph by Larry Ditto.

Discussion

Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush has a discontinuous range from northeastern Mexico southward to western Panama (Howell and Webb 1995, Ridgley and Gwynne 1989). The northernmost population of this species is found near Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, some 240 km from the Rio Grande (Robins and Heed 1951). Approximately 130 km farther south, populations have been studied extensively at Rancho del Cielo, in Tamaulipas. This work began in 1949 and 1950, when Harrell (1951) investigated the breeding avifauna and determined that *C. mexicanus* was the most common species there, with an av-

erage of 105 pairs/40.5 ha. In Tamaulipas, where Black-headed Nightingale-Thrushes are abundant in summer but rare in winter (Arvin 2001), they are primarily found in an elevational range of 900 to 1800 m. The first spring arrivals have been found as early as mid-March (Harrell 1951), but the majority of the population arrives on nesting grounds in mid-April. Phillips (1991) was of the opinion that the species is absent from the northernmost portion of its range between early October and mid-April and reported that the northernmost winter record was in eastern San Luis Potosí. However, the species appears to be very rare in winter in southern Tamaulipas: although Harrell (1951) did not record it at all during his study; Arvin (pers. comm.) has recorded one individual during this season since 1972. The Pharr record appears to represent the first extralimital record of the species, although spring "overshoots" in northeastern Mexico would likely go undetected.

Pharr is located in the Lower Rio Grande Valley approximately half way between the mouth of the Rio Grande and Falcon Dam. Pharr and McAllen merge into one metropolitan complex, and there is very little remaining native vegetation in this area. Therefore, the Williams's yard and the adjoining undeveloped lot provide an island of native vegetation in an otherwise urbanized environment. The property owner's intensive efforts to revegetate the yard with native plants, including the addition of many fruiting species, have further enhanced this small patch of thornscrub for birds: other species that frequented the Williams's yard during the nightingale-thrush's stay included Plain Chachalaca (*Ortalis vetula*), Buff-bellied Hummingbird (*Amazilia yucatanensis*), Brown-crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*), Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*), Black-crested Titmouse (*Baeolophus atricristatus*), Clay-colored Robin (*Turdus grayi*), Long-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma longirostre*), Olive Sparrow (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*), and a vagrant Blue Mockingbird (*Melanotis caerulescens*).

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