First record of Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) in North America

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Abstract

This paper documents the occurrence of a Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) at Saint-Fulgence, Québec, Canada 11-17 November 2006. This record represents the first of this species within the North American continental boundaries as defined by the American Ornithologists' Union (A.O.U. 1998).

Field encounter

On 11 November 2006, Claude Samson and Diane Côté found an unfamiliar thrush in their backyard at Saint-Fulgence (48° 27' N, 70° 54' W), in the Saguenay–Lake-Saint-Jean region of Québec. Due to its secretive behavior and because it was seen very infrequently in the next four days, Samson and Côté were unsuccessful in their attempts to identify the bird. In the late afternoon of 16 November, Germain Savard received several photographs of the mystery bird taken by Samson through a telescope from inside the house. With no field guides at hand at his place of work, Savard was also unable to identify the bird conclusively and so forwarded the photographs to Claude Auchu and Christiane Girard for comment. That evening, Savard received a phone call from them that they had identified the bird as a Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), which they knew would represent a first record of the species for North America. Given the importance of this discovery, an opinion was also solicited from Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa, who independently identified the bird as a Song Thrush. The following day, 17 November, Savard and seven other birders of the Saguenay region gathered at the living room window of the Samson–Côté home, the only place where it was possible to see the Song Thrush without frightening it. The bird was then observed intermittently throughout the day. A strong cold front swept over the region the following night, and the Song Thrush was not observed thereafter. During the week prior to the passage of this front, rain and very low cloud cover had persisted, conditions that probably kept the thrush grounded during this time. On 17 November, the last day on which the bird was observed, the temperature reached a maximum of 20° C, which was exceptional for this time of year.

Figure 1. Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) at Saint-Fulgence, Québec, 16 November 2006. The pattern of the head is rather complex: pale auriculars, mottled with brown and showing a distinct lower/rear border; a mostly pale malar area with limited flecking; a dark submalar mark that broadens at the lower terminus; a pale eye ring, most distinct at the rear of the eye; small pale flecks in the crown; dark brown lores; and an indistinct supraloral spot weakly connected to a faint, narrow superciliary mark. All photographs were taken through a window from within the photographer's home on this date. *Photograph by Claude Samson.*

Description and identification

The Song Thrush (Figures 1, 2, 3) appeared intermediate in size between the North American *Catharus* thrushes and American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). The upperparts were plain grayish brown without any obvious paler or darker areas other than in wing coverts (see below) and faint, small pale marks in the crown. The underparts were whitish, strongly marked with drop-like, dark brown spots on the chest, flanks, belly, and undertail coverts. A soft russet-buff coloration was obvious on the upper breast and faintly present on the flanks and auriculars. The white throat was framed by dark submalar stripes, narrow near the chin and broader and more diffuse, with several tiers of stippling, at the lower terminus. The malar area was mostly off-white in color, with a few flecks of brown but mostly clean, in contrast to the auriculars, which were finely mottled with brown, and the submalar markings. The lower/posterior portion of

the auriculars was outlined by a dark, rather distinct crescent. The eyes were dark. A whitish eye ring was most distinct at the rear of the eye, and a rather faint, indistinct superciliary arc joined a faint pale supraloral mark, but the lores (anterior of the eye ring) showed a dark brown blotch, which was connected to an arc of dark feathering that extended posteriorly below the eye into the auriculars. The tail was rather short, and the wings appeared the same color as the back.

In several of the photographs, a molt limit is clearly visible in the upperwing coverts, which permits ageing of this individual as a hatch-year bird. The inner greater coverts are tipped by weak pale marks (thus fresh adult-type feathers), whereas the outer coverts showed larger rusty-buff terminal spots forming a noticeable wing bar (slightly worn juvenile-type feathers; Svensson 1992). Several outer median coverts of the upperwing also show buff tips. Three observers saw the underwing coverts as the bird stretched its wings briefly and described them as orange-buff. The bill appeared stout and long—rather similar to that of American Robin in shape—and was mostly blackish, with a yellow-orange tomium. The legs were dull grayish pink. The bird was observed only from inside the house, thus no vocalizations could be heard. The absence of bands, along with the pristine conditions of the plumage and bare parts, suggest that this bird had not been held in captivity.

The field marks described above readily eliminate the North American *Catharus* thrushes, Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*), and Redwing (*T. iliacus*); the latter shows rusty-red flanks, reddish underwing coverts, and a distinct buffy-white supercilium. The Song Thrush's auricular border and eye ring are illustrated but not mentioned in European field guides, probably because they are not relevant in distinguishing Song Thrush from similar species in Europe, such as Mistle Thrush (*T. viscivorus*), which has a longer tail and white underwing coverts (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney et al. 1999, Beaman and Madge 1998, Sinclair and Ryan 2003, Collar 2005). These were, however, among the details that prompted Auchu and Girard to consider Song Thrush. Chinese Thrush (*T. mupinensis*) of central China, which is very similar to Song Thrush, shows bolder white wing bars, bright orange underwings, and more pronounced auricular borders (MacKinnon and Philips 2000). It has been suggested that Chinese Thrush forms a superspecies with Song Thrush (Cramp 1988, Sibley and Monroe 1990).

The yard frequented by the thrush was a well-vegetated property along the Saguenay River planted mainly with White Spruce (*Picea glauca*), Northern White-Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*), and Showy Mountain-Ash (*Sorbus decora*). The bird spent most of its time on the ground eating the fallen fruits of Showy Mountain-Ash and some insects. More rarely, it perched in the trees to take fruit. After feeding for a few minutes, it usually disappeared for periods of up to two hours. Very reclusive in the first days of its visit, it had become more confiding and fed for longer periods during the last few days of its visit. In general, it seemed a shy bird and most frequently remained motionless when disturbed. It often ran on the ground, holding its head low. It was seen on several occasions feeding in the company of European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*); no interactions were noted between the species.

Discussion

Song Thrushes nest commonly from Scandinavia, the British Isles, and northern Spain eastward to Lake Baikal in southern Siberia. The species winters mainly in western Europe but reaches northern Africa and the Middle East as far east as Iran. Introduced populations persist in southeastern Australia and in New Zealand (Long 1981, Collar 2005). Although geographic variation is slight and clinal, four subspecies of Song Thrush are recognized (Cramp 1988, Collar 2005). In northern and continental Europe (except in the west), the breeding subspecies is nominate *philomelos*. In western Europe, two subspecies occur: *hebridensis*, inhabiting the Outer Hebrides and the Isle of Skye, and *clarkei*, resident in the rest of the British Isles, western and central Netherlands, Belgium, and northwestern and western France (Cramp 1988). East of these subspecies is *T. p. nataliae*, which breeds in central and western Siberia and winters in northeastern Africa and southwestern Asia (Collar 2005). Differences in coloration, size of spots on the underparts, and overall size are the main distinguishing characteristics among these subspecies. Identification of the Saint-Fulgence bird to subspecies was not possible in the field or from photographs, but it is reasonable to assume that this vagrant was of the migratory nominate subspecies based on its pattern of occurrence to both Greenland and Iceland.

Figure 2. The molt limit between the juvenile outermost greater coverts and the adult innermost greater coverts, well visible here, is typical of a hatch-year bird. *Photograph by Claude Samson.*

Outside its typical range, Song Thrush an annual vagrant in Iceland, with an average of 13 to 14 birds reported per year between 1979 and 2003, most of these occurring during the months of October and November (<www.hi.is/~yannk/status_turphi.html>). The autumn of 2006 had reports of at least 38 individuals in Iceland (the second highest number on record), including 36 during the period 12-15 October. Song Thrushes in Iceland have been mostly of the nominate subspecies, although three January specimens of *hebridensis* have been obtained there (Y. Kolbeinsson, pers. comm.). There is also a Greenland record of a mummified Song Thrush of the nominate subspecies from June 1982 (Boertmann 1994, 1998). As Greenland was not included in the seventh edition of the American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list* (A.O.U. 1998), the Saint-Fulgence Song Thrush represents the first record for the A.O.U. area as currently defined (A.O.U. 1998) and for continental North America. Neither Song Thrush

Figure 3. The U-shaped crescent bordering the rear of the auriculars and the pale eye ring (most prominent along the rear of the eye)—both marks absent in North American *Catharus* thrushes—were among the features that alerted observers to the presence of a vagrant species. *Photograph by Claude Samson.*

nor Chinese Thrush is kept in captivity in North America, according to the data of the International Species Information System (ISIS 2007), and some Song Thrushes are kept in private collections, mostly in large urban centers (S. Deshaies, pers. comm.). Largely based on its long history of vagrancy to Iceland, Song Thrush has been considered a likely species to appear in North America (Pétursson 1997, Petersen 2000).

Inasmuch as the Song Thrush was found over 1000 km away from the Atlantic coast, it is difficult to associate its presence in Saint-Fulgence with a weather system, as is often possible with Song Thrushes in Iceland, for instance, where eastward-moving low-pressure systems often bring waves of Eurasian passerines (Y. Kolbeinsson, pers. comm.). In September 2006, strong easterly and northerly winds brought a record-high number (36) of Northern Wheatears (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) into northeastern North America, and four Common Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) were found in Newfoundland; however, October, the peak month for Song Thrush migration (Milwright 2006, Cramp 1988), saw no notable movement of Eurasian species in 2006. It is tempting to speculate that the Saint-Fulgence Song Thrush was part of the movement that was observed in Iceland in mid-October. This bird could well have reached land somewhere on the coast of Labrador, then moved southward inland to find itself in a birder's backyard in the Saguenay area a month later.

Despite its inland location, the Saguenay River valley and Lake-Saint-Jean regions have hosted several uncommon primarily Eurasian taxa, including Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), Eurasian Whimbrel (*Numemius phaeopus phaeopus*), Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*), Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*), Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*), White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), and Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*).

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