

## **Status and Occurrence of Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.**

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) is a pragmatic passerine that breeds in Eastern North America from Maine to Florida, west to North Texas, north through Oklahoma, northeastern Colorado, northeastern Wyoming, eastern Montana, southern Alberta, east across southern Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, southern Ontario, through southern Quebec, and New Brunswick (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The northern population of the Brown Thrasher migrates south to winter in the southern areas of the bird's breeding range with birds wintering from New Mexico to southern Texas (Cavitt and Haas 2014). This species is very rare, but regular migrant vagrant in California where some birds will spend the winter (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The Brown Thrasher is not a review species of the California Bird Records Committee and averages about seven sightings a year (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, the Brown Thrasher is also a very rare, but surprisingly regular migrant vagrant with about 30 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there are 13 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Brown Thrasher is a very rare to casually occurring migrant vagrant with over 35 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The Brown Thrasher is an accidental species to Alaska with 7 State records and a single record for the Northwest Territories (West 2008, Cavitt and Haas 2014). This species is also rare, but regular to the Maritime Provinces (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Brown Thrasher has been recorded twice in Europe (Lewington *et al.* 1992)

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Brown Thrasher is covered in all standard North American field guides. In the context of British Columbia, there are no other regularly occurring species that look anything like this species. This makes identification fairly straight-forward.

The Brown Thrasher is a large, boldly patterned thrasher that is 29 cm in length making this species a bit larger than an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) which is 25 cm in length (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Adult birds have bright rufous upperparts; whitish underparts that are coarsely streaked with blackish lines with pale legs and feet (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Brown Thrasher has a long rufous tail and 2 whitish wing-bars (Sibley 2000). The bill is large and somewhat straight (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are yellow (Sibley 2000). Both the males and females are similar in both their overall size and colouration (Ridgway 1907). Juvenile birds are similar in appearance to adults except the upperparts have indistinct buff spotting with buffy wing-bars, and a gray to grayish olive iris (Howell and Webb 2010, Pyle 1997).

The song of the Brown Thrasher consists of rich, musical phrases that are repeated two or three times with a distinct pause between each set (Sibley 2000). The call note is a loud, sharp, “chak”, but can also give a sharp “tssuk” or a low “peeoori” or “breeew” sounding note (Sibley 2000).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

In British Columbia, the Brown Thrasher is a very rare to casually occurring species with 37 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). This species has occurred 5 times in Vancouver, 6 times on Vancouver Island, once in the Fraser Valley, 15 times in the interior, 7 times in the Peace River region, once on the north coast and once on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The Provincial records of Brown Thrasher have occurred throughout the year (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Most reports come from the spring and early summer period from April 1 – June 15 with 19 records (51%) (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are only a few records for the summer period from June 16 – August 15 with 4 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are some fall records from August 16 – November 30 with 8 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Incredibly, the Brown Thrasher has been recorded 6 times in the winter from December 1 – the end of February in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The occurrence pattern of vagrancy found in British Columbia mirrors the patterns found from California to Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Hamilton *et al.* 2007, WRBC 2012). Most birds found in British Columbia are likely overshoots that have strayed off course from their normal migration route (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Almost all records found in British Columbia have been of single birds. There is excellent breeding habitat in the southern Peace River region where the individual records of Brown Thrasher have been found during the summer months (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.). It is entirely possible, given the close breeding population in Alberta that the Brown Thrasher could be found in this area as a localized breeding species in the future. This species can turn up anywhere in British Columbia and will come to bird feeders in the winter months (Campbell *et al.* 1997). Observers are encouraged to pay close attention to odd-sounding “mimic” birds in the late spring and during the summer period. It is very likely that there will be future records of the Brown Thrasher in British Columbia.



Figure 1: Record #26: Brown Thrasher adult banded at Colony Farm Banding Station on June 9, 2009. Photo © courtesy of Derek Mathews/VARC.



Figure 2: Record #26: Brown Thrasher adult banded at Colony Farm Banding Station on June 9, 2009. Photo © courtesy of Derek Mathews/VARC.





Figure 3: Record #28: Brown Thrasher adult found in New Hazelton on June 5, 2011.  
Photo © Ray Sturney.

**Table 1: Records of Brown Thrasher for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult June 9, 1968: John & Hettie Miller: Clearwater (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 2.(1) adult September 21-22, 1970: Steve Cannings, mobs (BC Photo 109) Penticton (Cannings 1972, Cannings *et al.* 1987)
- 3.(1) adult Feb 23- April 29, 1972: Hugh Tarr, mobs (BC Photo 200) Eagle Harbour, W. Vancouver (Crowell and Nehls 1972b, Campbell 1974, Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 4.(1) immature November 17 & 21, 1973: Adrian Dorst, mobs: Sandhill Creek, near Comber's Beach, PRNP (Hatler *et al.* 1978)
- 5.(1) adult December 19, 1976: (photo) Terrace (Weismiller and Weismiller 1977)
- 6.(1) adult May 30-June 2, 1979: Paul C. James, mobs (BC Photo 525) Mitlenach Island (James and Richardson 1982)
- 7.(1) adult June 12, 1980: David J. Low: Duck Meadows, Monte Creek (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 8.(1) adult May 18, 1983: D. Wood: Riverview, Creston (Butler *et al.* 1986)
- 9.(1) adult December 18, 1983- March 6, 1984: (BC Photo 907) Beaver Falls, between Trail and Fruitvale (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 10.(1) adult December 17, 1985-January 11, 1986: (photo & tape recording) feeder at Silver Hills Ranch (Rogers 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 11.(1) adult singing male April 22, 1988: Glen R. Ryder: Michaud Crescent, Langley (Campbell 1988b, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 12.(1) adult September 18, 1990: Delta (Campbell *et al.* 1997)

- 13.(1) adult June 5, 1993: Kimpton: Wilmer National Wildlife Area, 4 km north of Wilmer  
(Kimpton 1993, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 14.(1) adult male singing June 20, 1994: Mark Phinney, mobs: 8 km SW of Swan lake along rd to  
Tumbler Ridge (Davidson 1995, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 15.(1) adult June 9, 1997: R. Ritcey: Cottonwood Flats, Avola (Bain and Holder 1997d,  
Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 16.(1) adult November 28, 1997-March 4, 1998: D. Walker, mobs: Terrace (Bowling 1998b,  
Bowling 1998c, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 17.(1) adult May 6, 1998: Janet and Mike Brown: Tlell, QCI (Bowling 1998c,  
Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 18.(1) adult May 24, 2000: Mark Phinney (photo) Bear Mountain in Dawson Creek  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 19.(1) adult July 21, 2004: Ted Hillary: 6 km south of Salmon Arm along Hwy 97B near  
Grandview Bench Road (Cecile 2004d, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 20.(1) unknown age October 9, 2004: Mike Shepard: on Ten Mile Point, Victoria  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 21.(1) adult June 3, 2005: Gail Spitler, mobs (photo) Johnson's Landing, Kaslo (Cecile 2005d,  
Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 22.(1) immature September 8, 2005: Jukka Jantunen: McQueen's Slough, Dawson Creek  
(Cecile 2006a, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 23.(1) adult July 17-18, 2006: Madeline McIntyre, Roger Taylor: Edwards Road, west off Hwy 19  
btwn Nanoose Bay (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 24.(1) adult September 13-14, 2006: George Bradd, mobs (photo) Wickaninnish Interpretive  
Centre, PRNP (Cecile 2007a, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 25.(1) adult mid-June, 2007: Doug Brown, Gary Davidson: Wolverine FSR near Tumbler Ridge  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 26.(1) adult June 6 & 8, 2009: Derek Matthews, mobs (photo: banded) Colony Farm  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 27.(1) adult June 12, 2010: Doug Brown: off Jackfish Lake Road at 11.6 km on Del Rio Road,  
Chetwynd (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 28.(1) adult June 5, 2011: Ray Sturney, mobs (photo) New Hazelton (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 29.(1) adult July 7 & 18, 2011: Rick Toochin: near Ruby Creek, Agassiz (Toochin *et al.* 2014d)
- 30.(1) adult July 7, 2011: Doug Brown (photo) at the 98.5 km mark on the Sierra Yoyo Desan  
Road, North of Ft. Nelson (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 31.(1) adult June 2012: Doug Adama: south of Golden (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.)
- 32.(2) adults December 25, 2012: Jack Loepky, mobs (photo) Cranbrook  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- (1) adult December 26, 2012-March 24, 2013: Jack Loepky, mobs (photo) Cranbrook  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 33.(1) adult June 13-15, 2013: Keith Jordon, Brian Starzomski, mobs (photo) Hakai Beach  
Institute, Calvert Island (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 34.(1) adult October 17, 2013: Adrian Dorst (photo) Long Beach, Pacific Rim National Park  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014b)

- 35.(1) adult June 26, 2014: Rick Toochin: along Highway 17 1km before 104<sup>th</sup> St., Surrey  
(R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)
- 36.(1) adult October 26, 2014: Glenda Pye (photo) Chetwynd (R. Cannings Pers. Comm.)
- 37.(1) adult May 21, 2015: Frank Chappell (photo) Kootenay National Park  
(M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult June 22, 2005: unknown observer: Grant Narrows Nature Dyke Trail, Pitt Meadows  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014c)
- 2.(1) adult singing (heard only) May 27, 2015: Greg Ross: Cranbrook south, East Kootenay  
(M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)

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