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Documented Winter Records of Swainson's Thrush in U.S.A. and Canada

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Part of the documentation for an "out-of-season" bird may be its being banded by a reputable bander. Since banding data often contribute to patterns of change in bird distribution, it might be advantageous to leave unverified records in the Bird Banding Laboratory's data base with a code indicating that the record has not been verified and should be used with caution. Thus, this unverified data would remain available should subsequent data indicate a trend.

An example is the following banding of an out-of-season Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*). On 11 November 1988, I noticed a thrush frequenting a small patch of grass and weeds in a corner of my property. Upon closer inspection, my husband, Roger, and I found the bird had a continuous olive-brown back and tail, no rusty, ruling out Hermit Thrush (*C. guttatus*). It had a buffy throat, upper breast and cheek, with a wide eye ring and large breast spots, ruling out the Gray-cheeked Thrush (*C. fuscescens*) and Veery (*C. minimus*). Although identification was never really in question, these details confirmed its identity as a Swainson's Thrush

Early the next morning, the bird was banded with USFW band #1221-13277. Upon examination, we found the 7th and 8th primary emarginated, thus reinforcing our sight identification of the previous day. Crown and back had buffy streaks with terminal spots on the feathers, and the retained juvenal coverts made it a hatching-year bird, sex unknown (Anon. North American Bird Banding Manual, 1986).

Temperature range on the day of banding was 58-74° (14-23° C). The bird repeated in my nets on 31 December 1988 and 4 January 1989, thereby

documenting the fact that it stayed around the banding station for almost two months (first seen 11 Nov. 88, and banded 12 Nov. 88). This was the 454th Swainson's Thrush banded by us in over 22 years of banding (Foy and Foy 1990), and is the first documented record of this species seen and handled in January in the U.S.A. and Canada (Foy and Foy 1990).

DISCUSSION

The normal winter range of the Swainson's Thrush is in central South America (Bent 1949; A.O.U. 1983) with casual records to the Texas Gulf Coast (A.O.U. 1983). Blom and Wilds (1984) stated, "There is no evidence for wintering by this species anywhere in North America." They also stated that they knew of no specimen or photographic evidence.

Sight Records

Nevertheless, in New York City between 1950 and 1964, Bull (1964) states "... there have been about a half dozen sight records in December and early January, nearly all by reliable and experienced observers and, in several instances, by three or more people..." The birds pass through the Carolinas on their return trip to the tropics in September and October. Occasional birds may linger into winter along the coast (Potter et al. 1980). Numerous Christmas Bird Counts throughout the United States have reported this thrush; five have recorded it three or more times in the ten-year period (1962-1972) examined. The bird was found

at five sites not on the Gulf Coast, however, but on the Atlantic coast of Florida and South Carolina (Root 1988).

Between 1982 and 1990, seven states, six north of North Carolina, had twelve documented winter sightings, one in November and eleven in December (Table 1).

In Canada, McNicholl (1985) found no winter records outside December (except an extremely early spring date of 23 March). However, he did find eleven or twelve December records (depending on whether sightings at two locations near Ottawa in 1984 involved one or two birds). All but two of these were sight records (not all properly documented), but at least four were observations by some of Ontario's top birders. Two records were of birds observed for several days by Alan Wormington, the authority to whom most rarity reports are sent for critical comment by the editors of *Ontario Birds*.

A "first local winter (sight) record" for Leamington, Ontario, Canada, was 1-2 January 1991; another winter sight record in Cedar Creek, 16 December 1989, "excellent details and photographs" (Pratt 1991); and one more in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, 2 December 1987. Thus, between 1954 and 1991, there were 24 documented winter records published for the U.S.A. and Canada (Table 1 and Figure 1). Note that this total excludes three published but undocumented records from Ontario (Table 1).

Banding Records

It is appropriate, in view of the fact that little is known about U.S. and Canadian winter movements of this species, to put them in perspective. I examined thirty-five years (1955-1989) of banding records from the Bird Banding Office in Laurel, Maryland. In addition to my own winter banding in 1988, I found three other North Carolina winter banding records: one between 21 and 25 November 1973, age hatching year by Dr. S. Tipton; one between 11 and 15 November 1975, age unknown, by Dr. S. Tipton; and one between 1 and 5 November 1978, age hatching year, by Dr. C. Blake (see Figure 1).

The December 1984 Canadian banding record occurred in Ontario when David Agro and David Shepherd caught a hatching-year bird in a ground trap at about 1400 on 20 December at the Old Cut cottage of the Long Point Bird Observatory, Port Rowan. The bird had plenty of fat, appeared healthy, and flew strongly upon release after banding (#1321-67708). Good details are on file at observatory headquarters (McNicholl 1985).

When U.S.A. and Canadian bandings of Swainson's Thrush are combined, there is a total of 149. Almost half of this number, 49% (73), were banded between 16 November and 20 December. Banding records provide stronger evidence of the winter occurrence of the Swainson's Thrush than sight records, since these birds are examined in the hand, as was the 1987 bird in Massachusetts. This bird was sight identified incorrectly on 10 December 1987 as a Hermit Thrush however, after it struck a window on 12 December, it proved to be a Swainson's Thrush (Table 1).

Photographs and Specimens

Photographs and specimens provide the strongest evidence of all. At Cedar Creek (Canada) on 16 December 1989, a bird was "photographed with excellent details" (Table 1). On 2 December 1976, a Swainson's Thrush was observed to fly into a window at Kingsville, Ontario. The bird was brought to Point Pelee National Park, Ontario, by Norm Rattan. R.D. McRae prepared it as a specimen and determined it to be a hatching-year bird by the amount of skull ossification. The bird is now specimen N.M.C. #85838 in the Canadian Museum of Natural History, Ottawa, Canada (pers. comm. H. Ouellet, 24 December 1991).

The most northerly winter records probably represent birds that were late hatchings or were injured or sick during the time of their normal southward migration which kept them north until after their migratory urges waned. In some cases, however, as in North Carolina's coastal plain, the birds could very well be responding to extremely favorable mild weather (McNicholl 1991); or, they could also be the precursors of a changing pattern.

SUMMARY

The 24 sight records, photograph, banding records, and specimen combine to indicate the A.O.U. winter range is outdated. And, by the same token, the statement by Blom and Wilds is overstated.

As this paper has pointed out, these birds do linger along the northeast coast and into Canada long after the month of October. Root (1988) calls this species "nomadic" since its abundance varies dramatically from year to year.

Banding data used here were sent to the author in 1990. The data may not be complete, as the Banding Office purges their files of certain data; in some cases, using a 25-year-old data base as criteria (Foy and Foy 1990). Unless a written description or a picture is received, data are rejected and not put into the computers (pers. comm. 12 April 1990, Bird Banding Lab.). In some cases, banders have been asked for verification anywhere from seven months to two years after banding (Foy and Foy 1990).

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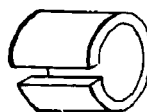


Table 1. Documented winter sight records of Swainson's Thrush in North America

- 1982 . . 18 December. North Carolina, Raleigh. *American Birds* 37:536.
1984 . . 11 December. Pennsylvania, Rector (Powdermill Nature Reserve). "... a previously banded bird that now had a healed wing injury. . ." *American Birds* 39:167.
18 December. Virginia, Harrisonburg. *American Birds* 39:167.
22 December. New York, N. Nassau County (Long Island). *American Birds* 39:502.
23 December. New York Rockland County. *American Birds* 39:505.
15 December. North Carolina, Greensboro. *American Birds* 39:555.
1985 . . 22 December. New Jersey, Cape May. *American Birds* 40:263.
21 December. North Carolina, Raleigh. *American Birds* 40:747.
29 December. North Carolina, Wilmington. *American Birds* 40:749.
30 December. North Carolina, Tyron. (6 birds) *American Birds* 40:748.
1987 . . 10-12 December. Massachusetts, Woods Hole. "... Bird was ironically identified as a Hermit, struck a window on the later date, proved to be a Swainson's Thrush. . ." *American Birds* 42:230.
1990 . . 6 November. Maryland, Sandy Point State Park. *American Birds* 45:87.

Canadian documented sight records with one specimen:

- 1954 . . 5 December. Toronto. McNicholl, 1985.
1967 . . 15 & 20 December. London. McNicholl, 1985.
1976 . . 2,11,12,26 December. Hamilton. McNicholl, 1985.
2 December. Kingsville. Specimen. McNicholl, 1985.
1979 . . 5 to 8 December. Point Pelee. McNicholl, 1985.
1980 . . ? December. Blenheim. praised by editor for "excellent details." McNicholl, 1985
1981 . . 1 December. Toronto. McNicholl, 1985.
1984 . . 13 December. Ottawa. McNicholl, 1985.
16 December. Ottawa. McNicholl, 1985.
1989 . . 16 December. Cedar Creek. Pratt, 1991.
1991 . . 1-2 January. Leamington. "... a first local winter record. . ." Weir, 1991.

Province of Nova Scotia:

- 1987 . . 9 December. Dartmouth. *American Birds* 42:230.

Three Ontario records are considered "inconclusive" and are not on the map (McNicholl 1985):

- (a) 1971 Deep Water (Renfrew Co.) in December
- (b) 1978 St. Thomas (Elgin Co.) in December
- (c) 1980 St. Thomas (Elgin Co.) in December

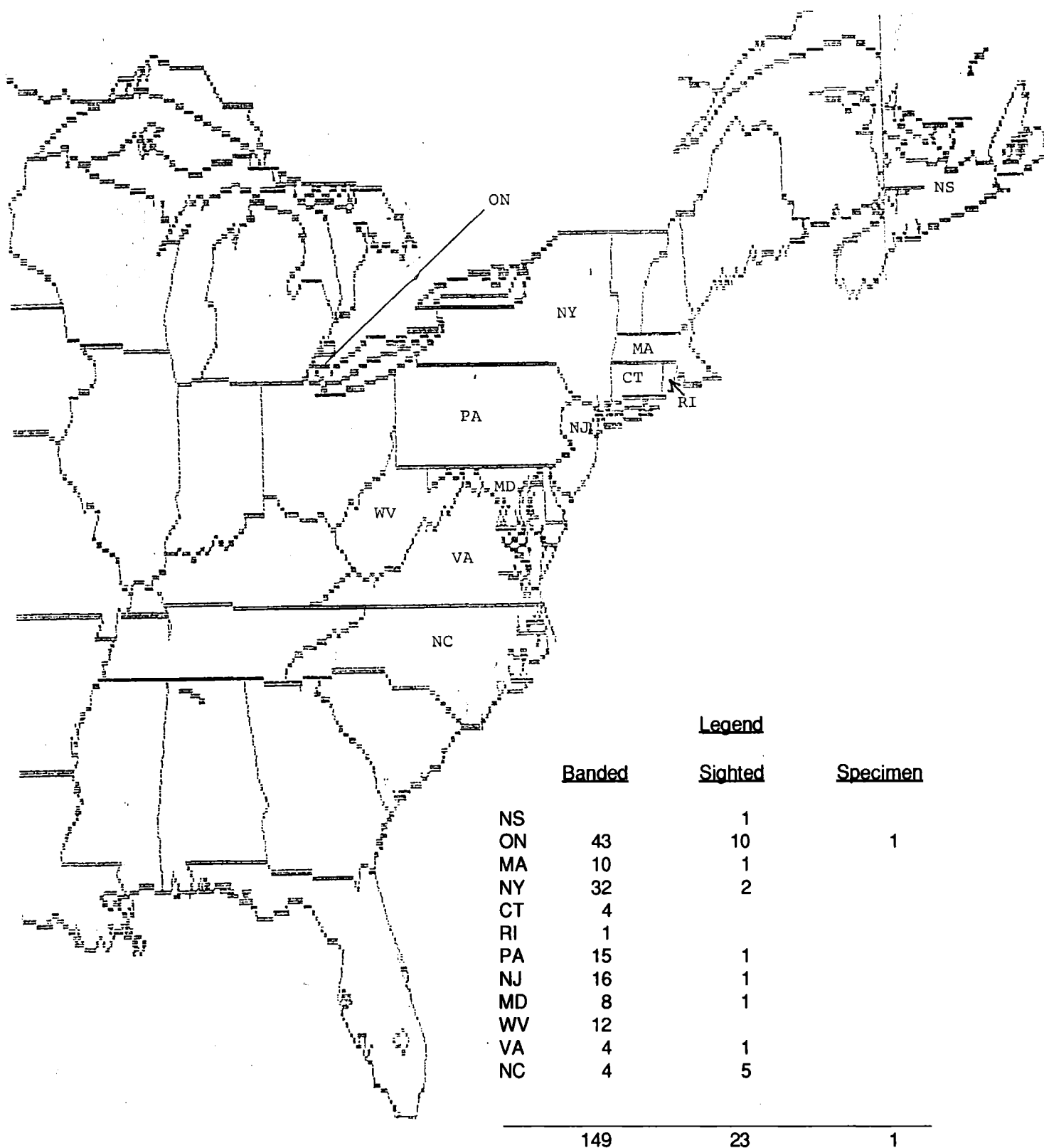


Figure 1. Map showing Swainson's Thrush sightings and bandings In the U.S.A. and Canada, 1954-1991.