



## Brown Thrasher Winters at a Chicago Feeder

by Christine Philip

**10 January 1994** - I saw a Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) on a feeder eating seed in the "magic" courtyard at the Fourth Presbyterian Church at Delaware St. and Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago across from the John Hancock Build-

### How could this bird be surviving the winter blasts at night?

ing. Could it be the same thrasher I noticed in the courtyard in late November and on and off through 25 December?

Berries, albeit shriveled, still hung on the hawthorne trees. Icicles dripped with water. Yesterday, I had also noticed many trees east of Michigan Ave. still holding their berries and crab apples.

The courtyard is very small. In the center are two large trees completely

ringed from top to bottom with Yellow-bellied Sapsucker holes. Fairly dense shrubs grow in two corners and some grape-leaved ivy climbs the church's stone walls. The courtyard is open only on the east side where it faces the Hancock Building; thus it is reasonably sheltered from the wind.

This courtyard almost always has an unusual bird in it. But a Brown Thrasher in winter? It would have to leave soon or perish.

**18 January** - Temperatures dipped to 65 degrees below zero with the windchill. The Brown Thrasher at the church survived. It sat still, conserving energy and following the progress of the sun as it moved around the courtyard.

**19 January** - I found the thrasher asleep in the sun. Glowing amber.

**20 January** - The thrasher opened one eye and then opened its mouth which was strawberry pink colored inside. I actually saw its tongue.

**28 January** - I returned from a nasty business trip to Boston and New York. A major ice storm pelted down on the way back. The Brown Thrasher was still in fine shape at the church despite a 2-inch layer of ice on top of everything and slush on top of that. There were still three White-throated Sparrows there, too.

I had expected to find a stiff body

at the base of the church wall. I worried that the ice coating would be frozen solid on all surfaces. How could this bird be surviving the winter blasts at night? There was no foliage left on the shrubs to offer any shelter.

**10 February, 18 February** - Brown Thrasher was fine.

**28 February** - Some of the snow and ice melted from the base of the church walls. The Brown Thrasher looked bedraggled, but it was on the grass and under the bushes, perhaps foraging for food.

**10 March** - I returned from a California business trip. The Brown Thrasher was gone.

**11 March** - Still no Brown Thrasher. The church caretaker, who cleans winter debris from under the shrubs, said he hadn't found a bird's body anywhere.

I hoped this bird had flown free at last. From now on, I'll wonder if every Brown Thrasher I see in the magic churchyard is the wintering bird of 1994. And I will always remember how welcome in the snow this bird was to me throughout the long, cold winter.

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Feeder station drawing by Denis Kania