

SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS

Townsend's Solitaire Winters in DuPage County

by Melinda Born Chapman

After an early January 1999 blizzard dumped almost 2 feet of snow in northeast Illinois, I was forced to abandon my favorite hiking trails at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, DuPage County. Cross-country skiing is no longer allowed, and I don't own a pair of snowshoes! When the snow cover started to recede in late January, I was eager to hit the trails.

On Sunday, 31 January 1999, I arrived at the Arboretum at approximately noon, and proceeded to hike Tree Trail Loop 2. The area consists of pine plantation, open sections with foreign plant collections, and an oak woodland that had very recently been cleared of alien shrubs. I very rarely hike solely to bird, but instead pick an area I enjoy hiking and then consider any avian finds a bonus.

I paused to enjoy a small flock of Eastern Bluebirds along the woodland edge. I didn't recall seeing them in this area before, and attributed it to the recent underbrush clearing. While I was watching them, I caught a flash of pale grey in the corner of my binoculars. My first thought was, a Northern Mockingbird, which would have been a rare sighting in DuPage County. But after focusing on the bird, I noted a pale eye ring.

Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*)? It couldn't be!

The bird began to flit around, apparently finding insects among the piles of newly chopped wood chips. I observed the grey-colored body and breast, buffy wing patches and white outer tail feathers. I enjoyed watching the bird for about 15 minutes before running to the car for my cell phone.

I phoned Tom Koz, a friend, and asked if he wanted to see a rare bird. He thought I was kidding. I told him I was absolutely serious, and asked if he could bring a field guide. I gave him directions, then went back to relocate the bird. When Tom arrived, I checked Peterson's Field Guide. It was a Townsend's Solitaire! Tom was able to



Townsend's Solitaire at the Morton Arboretum. 6 February 1999. Photo by Eric Walters.

get quite a few good photos before the bird flew away. A relaxing hike turned out to be an unbelievable event.

My observation constituted the fifth sighting in 40 years for a Townsend's Solitaire at the Morton Arboretum (Meadowlark 5:109). Since the first occurrence of Townsend's Solitaire in Illinois 120 years ago until the winter of 1995/1996, there had been 16 state records. With the sighting of a Townsend's Solitaire in Rockford 28 December 1996 through 3 March 1997 (Meadowlark 6:117) and my 1998 Morton Arboretum sighting, Illinois now has 18 records.

The Arboretum solitaire was seen at least until 21 March 1999 and appeared to be subsisting on a diet of berries and insects. It was seen in the company of American Robins, Eastern Bluebirds, and an Eastern Phoebe.

—Melinda Born Chapman
9 Oak Leaf Court
Woodridge, IL 60517