

Singin' the Bicknell Blues

by Scott Hickman

On 13 September 1998, Larry Larson and I were birding Ryerson Conservation Area, a 553-acre preserve bordering the DesPlaines River in northeastern Illinois. Swainson's Thrushes had been arriving in large numbers, and we were seeing lots of them. I was anxious to find a Gray-cheeked Thrush so Larry could compare these two similar species. Finally, as we neared the river, I spotted what seemed to be a classic Gray-cheeked. It was perched at head height about 6 or 7 yards away in a small tree. Most of the lower half of its body was obscured by vegetation, but the drab plumage of its back as well as the side of its face were clearly visible.

"Larry, quick, look at this bird," I said. "There is absolutely no eye ring, and it has a really gray face." At that point, the bird hopped to the ground. It was now fully in view with its olivish-brown back to us, revealing a strongly chestnut-colored tail! I concluded that I had just misidentified a Hermit Thrush and we continued our walk. After about 10 steps I realized a Hermit Thrush typically has an eye ring, and that the bird we saw did not cock its tail as Hermits often do. I wondered if we had just seen a Bicknell's Thrush, a form of the Gray-cheeked that was elevated to full species status in 1995. We immediately returned to the bird, and instantly relocated it. The bird was on the ground, facing away from us, with its head turned to afford us a lateral view of its face. I rechecked the face and tail. It was the same bird, with a nice drab back, a gray face with no eye ring, and a chestnut-colored tail. Just as I was ready to note other characteristics, the bird flew away.

So what did Larry and I see? According to the National Geographic Guide to Birds of North America, the Hermit Thrush is supposed to have a complete eye ring. This olivish-brown-backed bird we saw did not. The only other possibility for a drably olivish-brown backed thrush like this would have been Gray-cheeked, but our bird had a chestnut tail. Bicknell's has basically the same face as Gray-cheeked, but almost always (98%) has a chestnut-colored tail, while the Gray-cheek never does (Ouellet 1993). Considering these key characteristics, Bicknell's Thrush seems to be the only alternative. However, the occurrence of a migratory Bicknell's Thrush in Illinois has been considered doubtful (Graber et al. 1971), even though Ridgway (1889) and Coale (1916) report the collection of specimens from without our state during 1884 and 1909, respectively (for a review see Ford 1956).

I called Dr. Henri Ouellet to discuss my sighting, since his research served as the basis for separating Bicknell's from Gray-cheeked Thrush. He said my observations were consistent with Bicknell's, supported by the chestnut tail and by the impression I had that the tail color rather abruptly contrasted with the color of the back. In spite of these factors indicating this bird could well have been a Bicknell's Thrush, I was still uncomfortable claiming it for my Lake County list, a keen temptation since my Lake County list is my favorite, and this bird would bring me one closer to catching up with one of my Saturday birding friends, Al Stokie.

As Al quickly and correctly pointed out, the boldness of Hermit

Thrush eye rings must certainly vary. I casually tested this by keeping track of Hermit Thrush eye rings for the rest of the fall. While I could not find one that completely lacked an eye ring, I did observe two (out of over 100) that had indistinct ones. I also traveled to the Field Museum to view study skins to check for eye ring variability, and quickly learned this was something I couldn't determine from study skins. The skin at the edge of the specimen's eyes was just too dry and lightened to tell what was an eye ring and what was not. Therefore, at this time, I cannot completely discount the possibility that I saw an "eye-ringless" Hermit Thrush. I am also uncomfortable claiming this bird because of my lack of experience with Bicknell's Thrush. I've never seen one (maybe).

I thought if I could just see one for myself, I could compare "my bird" to a definite Bicknell's and come to a more solid conclusion. So, while attending the Wilson Ornithological Society's June 1999 meeting in Maine, I hiked three different mountains where this species is reputed to nest. No luck on any of the three and I didn't have time for a fourth try. These unsuccessful attempts left me where I still am, unable to compare the bird I saw with a Bicknell's Thrush.

My ability to come to a solid identification is further confounded by the conflicting descriptions of this species' tail color in key references. I was anxiously awaiting publication of the third edition of the National Geographic Guide to the Birds of North America because I knew it would include Bicknell's Thrush. When I got the book, I eagerly turned