A Challenge for Illinois Birders:
Separating Bicknell's from Gray-cheeked Thrush

by Steven D. Bailey

As early as 1881, ornithologists recognized the Bicknell's Thrush as a distinct form of the similar Gray-checked Thrush. (See the description of the then Gray-cheeked sub-species as given by Wallace in Bent 1949). In his article, "Singin the Bicknell Blues," Scott Hickman aptly describes some of the general differences between Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes. He also illustrates the potential for discovering a rarity, especially birds such as the Bicknell's Thrush, if one takes the time to study the rather subtle plumage differences in birds, such as in the genus *Catharus*. Other difficult identifications involving subtle plumage and or behavioral differences can be found in the *Myiarchus, Tyrannus,* and *Empidonax* flycatcher genuses, as well as some Spizella sparrow and Dendroica warbler species, especially in fall or worn plumages.

Birders in Illinois and other mid-western states must not only use extreme caution in trying to identify Bicknell's Thrush in the field, especially in fall, but they may also have to accept the fact that this species may be impossible to separate in the field from Gray-cheeked, unless it is singing. Although Hickman points out the general differences in the two species, those, as well as more detailed and discriminating differences (such as wing length and tail length) are not necessarily diagnostic. Even taking measurements to the nearest mm of a bird in the hand can fail to identify an individual to its species, since considerable overlap exists (Pyle 1997). Even a trait supposedly diagnostic for separating Bicknell's from Gray-cheeked, that of having a rufous-colored tail much like that of the similar Hermit Thrush, is not entirely fool proof. Not only are there variances in color tones of the upper parts within different populations of Bicknell's Thrush, but also at least one of the two recognized races of the Gray-cheeked Thrush have warm brown tones to the upper parts, which closely resemble the typical Bicknell's.

> Anyone trying to identify Bicknell's Thrush in the field in Illinois should throw out their field guides, or at least don't trust the plates or pictures you see, or take the text too literally.

Birders also need to consider other factors such as feather wear, stage of molt, and differences within one species. That can only further confound field identification.

Two excellent and fairly exhaustive articles (McLaren 1995, Smith 1996) describe the pitfalls of trying to distinguish these two species in the field. They also mention the other traits (including the more extensive amount of bright yellow on the lower mandible of Bicknell's) that were used as the basis for separating Bicknell's from Gray-cheeked Thrush in the paper (Ouellet 1993) that served as the justification for the A.O.U.'s (1995) acceptance of Bicknell's as a full species.

Illinois birders should consider several comments by Smith (1996) if they are trying to note some of the supposedly "diagnostic" field marks of Bicknell's Thrush. Ouellet's research was largely the result of using museum specimen data and genetic analysis, which means he had the advantage of studying the birds in the hand, under the best of conditions (e.g. control of lighting and other confounding variables that birders encounter in the field). After summarizing some of the difficulties in noting many of the sometimes subtle color and size differences brought out in McLaren's (1995) paper (see especially the color photos in this paper), Smith (1996) goes on to say that "birders who 'identify" such birds may only be "kidding themselves", and in quoting Phillips (1991) on *Catharus* thrushes in general, "if birds in the hand are so often misidentified by experts...it would be quite illogical to accept the 'well described' sightings of every Tom, Dick, and Harriet."

Also consider Smith's assessment that the best way to determine this species' migratory route (especially as it may apply to Illinois) and phenology would be to review museum specimens (especially those "Gray-cheeks" that may have not been sub-specifically identified) and bird-banding records containing measurements.