

I have been trying to determine the identity of a specimen in the Illinois Natural History Survey collection (which was earlier tentatively identified by ornithologist Richard Graber as a "possible bicknelli subspecies"). This particular bird was noticeably smaller than the other Gray-cheeked specimens in the drawer, also tentatively identified by Graber as possible *bicknelli*. However, after taking measurements of wing chord (length), tail length, and overall body length, as well as the body weight given on the specimen tag, the measurements mostly fell within the range of overlap with the small minima race of the Gray-cheeked Thrush (see Pyle 1997). On the positive side, the extent of yellow on the lower mandible of the bird seemed to be more than half its length as described by Ouellet (1993).

Another good point brought up by Smith is Rimmer's (1996) strong suggestion that this "new" species may already be endangered, with a total population of no more than 15,000 pairs. It will probably only continue to decline for several reasons, but probably the most serious of which is the destruction of its favored wintering habitat throughout the Caribbean archipelago. If an Illinois birder would like to consider his/her chances of finding a species with this small a population (especially well outside its known migratory flyway), consider the Kirtland's Warbler as a case in point. Kaufman (1995) mentions three possible observations of Kirtland's Warbler in nearby Indiana and western Ohio. However, this is mentioned with the following caveat and hypothesis that out of a probable known minimum of 1,500 Kirtland's Warblers leaving their breeding grounds that fall, there were a total of five reported observations in the species' "normal" migration corridor, anywhere in the rest of the eastern U.S. during fall migration. He then states "In other words, roughly one

out of every 300 Kirtland's was actually intercepted by the intense birding coverage of eastern North America", or if applied to all species in general, birders may "miss 299 out of every 300 passerines" migrating through our area!

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. You would be better off to study articles by McLaren (1995), Smith (1996), and Rimmer (1996). As stated by McLaren (1996), the field guides available then, as well as the still confusing plumage characteristics (especially color tones) of

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the new National Geographic Field Guide, only help to confuse someone hoping to derive help in separating the several races and species within the *Catharus* thrush family. Unfortunately, after reading about the difficulties in trying to identify a Bicknell's Thrush in the field, I imagine most of you are now ready to throw up the white flag and surrender! And unfortunately, I have a feeling the only birders in the state who will add this species to their state list are those who hear one sing, or those who have a scientific collecting permit.

But, one word of hope! Illinois does have one record of a rare species of thrush that breeds even farther north and northeast and winters even farther east and south than the Bicknell's, in western Africa, which also makes its migratory route through Illinois even more of an unlikely event. That bird is the Northern Wheatear.

If an Illinois birder were to try and find a Bicknell's Thrush in Illinois, a good place to look might be where large numbers of Gray-cheeked Thrushes, and so possibly a few Bicknell's, pass through the state, especially in spring in the extensive forests of the Shawnee National Forest in far southern Illinois, and to a lesser extent in some of the larger remaining forest tracts left in far east-central Illinois, especially in Vermilion County (pers. obs.). Large numbers of Gray-cheeked Thrushes have been killed at TV towers in the latter area (see Seets and Bohlen 1977). This is where the aforementioned INHS specimen of the "possible" Bicknell's was collected on 21 September 1966. However, Gray-cheekeds are extremely scarce in the far west and northwestern portions of the state (M. Baum, pers. com.), and uncommon in northeastern Illinois (Mlodinow 1984), as well as southern Illinois (Robinson 1996), in the fall.

With that said, if you discover an interesting Gray-cheeked Thrush and you think you may have a Bicknell's, try to stay with the bird as long as possible (no easy task with any thrush). Describe the plumage in great detail, especially as it may compare to nearby Gray-cheeks or other *Catharus* thrushes. Take a frame-filling photograph if possible. Maybe your documentation will become Illinois' first non-specimen record for the state!

Note: As of this writing, the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee has yet to vote on the status of two possible Illinois specimens of *bicknelli*, as mentioned in Bohlen (1989).