

The love song of *Catharus guttatus*: Hermit Thrushes singing in Illinois

by Paul R. Clyne



“For I have known them all already,
known them all:—
Have known the evenings, mornings,
afternoons,
I have measured out my life with
coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?”

—T. S. Eliot (1915),
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

I was not actually engaged in existential quandaries when I stepped outside under the bleak winter skies of 14 December 2005. Actually, I was going grocery shopping, picking up some sundries for house guests who'd arrived that day. Yet a few steps outside my front door I was compelled to pause, as I was faintly hearing unknown music from a distant quarter. My first guess was a newly acquired antique music box, playing from behind closed windows of some farther room of a neighbor's flat. That, or maybe wind-chimes from a back yard — also unknown music in the familiar terrain of my front doorstep.

My next guess was perhaps a bird's song emanating from the rear courtyard of our block of buildings. Not, after all, a song I knew, but the distance was great and the audibili-

ty was weak: Some faint, tinkling, enchanting tones, so enchanting that I paused a bit more, scanning the roofs and few visible treetops. No birds, and in any event I was under pressure to get on with errands.

Five steps closer to the grocery store I found the music's source just fifteen feet to my left: A Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) was whispering a song from a leafless bush in the tiny front yard of my neighbor's row-house. So ventriloquial and modest was its song that I'd supposed it had come from quite some distance, yet the bird was so close as to be clearly identifiable to the naked eye. Its rusty tail and

Above: Hermit Thrush at Kettle Moraine State Forest, South Unit (Walworth County) Wisconsin. 17 October 2004. Photo by Mary Kay Rubey.

rump contrasted with its plain brown back. It obliged me once or twice with its characteristic tail pump. Eventually, it also uttered its distinctive chup-note a few times, interspersed within its subdued song. Eventually, I reached the supermarket.

Groceries and errands consumed the better part of an hour, but on returning home at 3:40 in the afternoon, the Hermit Thrush was still engaged in subtle song. I dragged my binoculars and house guests outside to partake of this rare encounter. The guests remained polite for a moment or two before returning indoors. It was, after all, right about freezing, with scant snow flurries.

Several authors have remarked on how unusual it is to hear Hermit Thrushes singing outside their breeding grounds. Arthur Cleve-