

Juvenile Hermit Thrush in Chicago

By Geoffrey Williamson

On 9 October 2005 I was birding at the Jarvis Migratory Bird Sanctuary in Chicago's Lincoln Park, when a *Catharus* thrush landed about 15 feet away from me on the mulch path outside the fenced sanctuary. The bird was relatively tame and did not fly as I raised my binoculars to study it. The most striking features of the bird were the numerous feathers on the head and back that had buff spots. I also noted the reddish tail and uppertail coverts that contrasted with the gray-brown coloration of the remainder of the bird's upperparts. Clearly this bird was a Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*). The fact that the bird raised then slowly lowered its tail several times further supported this identification. I presumed at the time that the buff spots in the head and back feathers meant that this bird was a juvenile, which was confirmed by information in Pyle et al. (1987) and in Jones and Donovan (1996).

Though I had seen countless Hermit Thrushes in Illinois, this was the first time I had seen a juvenile of the species, and I recognized this occurrence as rather unusual for Illinois. I endeavored to photograph the bird using my digital camera hand-held to my binoculars. Several of the resulting images, though blurry, enabled one to identify the bird as a Hermit Thrush and showed the extensive amount of buff spotting in the feathers.

Though the southern edge of their breeding range reaches the middle latitudes of Wisconsin, Hermit Thrushes have never bred in Illinois (IORC, 1999). During the Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas project from



Juvenile Hermit Thrush observed in Chicago's Lincoln Park, 9 October 2005. Note the extensive spotting on the head and back and also the wing coverts. Photo by Geoffrey A. Williamson

1986 to 1991, not one Hermit Thrush was observed (Kleen, Cordle, and Montgomery, 2004), and no occurrences of Hermit Thrush are included in the summer seasonal reports of Meadowlark vol. 1–14. Therefore this bird was likely a migrant from outside Illinois.

In Hermit Thrushes, the first prebasic molt occurs from early July to early September and can be complete from August onward (Jones and Donovan, 1996), and fall birds arrive in Illinois no earlier than mid-August. Thus, juvenile-plumaged Hermit Thrushes are quite rare in Illinois, with most young birds that reach the state in fall having already attained first

basic plumage. Robert Hughes has noted that in 25 years of birding in Chicago, he has never seen a juvenile Hermit Thrush (pers. comm.). H. David Bohlen commented that during many years of observation in central Illinois, he has never seen a Hermit Thrush with retained juvenal feathering on the head or back (pers. comm.). Among 20 hatching year specimens of Hermit Thrushes in the Illinois State Museum collection, only three have a few light spots on the coverts and none have spots on the head or back (H. David Bohlen, pers. comm.). I examined Hermit Thrush skins in the Field Museum of Natural History's collection: none of the 207 specimens collected during August through November in Illinois showed spotting

in the head or back. Of these, at least 152 were noted as having less than 80% skull ossification and were likely immatures.



Adult female (bottom) and juvenile Hermit Thrush collected 29 July 1963 in Cheboygan, Michigan, from the holdings of the Field Museum of Natural History. Photo by Geoffrey A. Williamson