

Bendire's and Curve-billed and after more study of this most cooperative bird—it preened, it sang, it turned about (but never stepped boldly into uncluttered view)—we confidently declared it a Curve-billed Thrasher (*Toxostoma curvirostre*). We believed then we were looking at the first state record of this species.

Description

The bird was about the size and shape of a Brown Thrasher, although the tail seemed proportionately shorter. The bill was gray to black, long, decurved, and about two-thirds the length of the head. There was no lighter pigment at the base of the lower mandible. The line formed by the bottom of the lower mandible was slightly decurved. The upperparts were gray-brown. The throat was white to pale gray bordered by a thin dark malar streak. The eye was yellow-orange. The gray-brown wing had two wing bars, with the more prominent one consisting of at least six buff-tipped middle coverts.

The secondaries had a trace of light buff edging. The central rectrices were longer than the outs. Ventrally, the outer rectrix showed perhaps a half inch to an inch of silvery-white which faded into the gray brown color of the proximal portion of the rectrix. The outer webs of the outer rectrices were dark. A very thin buff tip to the rectrices could be seen dorsally. Feet and tarsi were gray to black. Upper breast spots were more numerous than those on the lower breast and the belly spots were sparse. Overall, the breast was pale-buff becoming buffier (almost orange-buff) on the sides, flanks, and vent. Under tail coverts were orange-

buff with lighter tips.

After viewing it for about an hour we lost sight of the bird as it flew low and down the fencerow. We left feeling confident our identification was correct and eager to get the word out to other birders. The next morning we met David Bohlen, Ted Teeter, and Tom and Penny Pucilek and found our thrasher at nearly the same spot we had left it the afternoon before.

Curve-billed vs. Bendire's

Our confidence was later eroded some upon reviewing articles and published photographs of Bendire's and Curve-billed Thrashers. For instance, we read that "Curve-billed and Bendire's Thrashers are indeed very similar," in an article written by John Farrand, Jr. for *American Birds*, 44:3 (Fall 1990). "Even today, expe-



Curve-billed Thrasher, Rend Lake, Jefferson Co. 6 January 1993. Photo by Dennis Oehmke.

rienced birders are sometimes hard put to decide which species they are seeing," he wrote. "Bendire's Thrasher is usually outnumbered by the Curve-billed and is often shy. It has always been the most difficult of the thrashers. The next time you are studying a bird you think might be a Bendire's Thrasher, binoculars in one

hand and Kenn Kaufman's new field guide in the other, take comfort from the fact that this bird has been a problem for almost 120 years."

We took comfort, but still, wondered: Had we seen enough to confirm our identification? We began a more detailed analysis.

The bill was long, but shorter than some photos of Curve-bills. Perhaps it was a hatch-year bird. Was the bill curved enough to rule out Bendire's?

A paler region at the base of the lower mandible seemed to be a scuffed area, not the lighter pigmented area that may distinguish Bendire's. Overall, though, the bill pointed toward Curve-billed Thrasher.

Eye color, we learned, is not a good field mark. In fact, the best field mark is the breast pattern. The overall pattern was one of large, roundish

spots. Fortunately, this bird was in fresh basic plumage. Although the bird did have some small arrowhead shaped spots (characteristic of Bendire's) at the center of the upper breast, the spots here were so numerous that individual spots got lost. We saw similar shaped spots at the center of the lower breast and

upper belly and these were smaller than many anteriorly. According to Kaufman (*American Birds*, 1990) this is a pattern never seen on Bendire's.

Aging and Subspeciation

After being confident with our speciation of the bird, we wondered whether the bird could be aged and subspeciated. Unfortunately, I had reviewed Pyle's (1987) *Identifica-*