

Brown thrasher returns after many years

by Alice L. Fuller

It had been years since they had hung out in our yard or garden. What a treat came our way when a pair of brown thrashers took up residence nearby once more. Since the sexes look alike, we could not tell whether it was the male or his mate who turned up regularly to dine on the suet cakes hung from the hickory nut tree in our backyard. I suspect that both he and she enjoyed them, as well as our other food offerings. So did one or more of their offspring, for we often observed a parent feeding a young one under the feeders. Although the rapidly growing nestlings soon resembled the adult birds, we noted that the youngsters had much shorter tails than their parents.

The brown thrasher has often been called a thrush, probably because with its cinnamon-brown color and streaked breast the thrasher does somewhat resemble our woodland thrushes. It can easily be distinguished from one of these thrushes by its slightly curved bill and long tail, which can be observed in Dorothy Bordner's drawing.

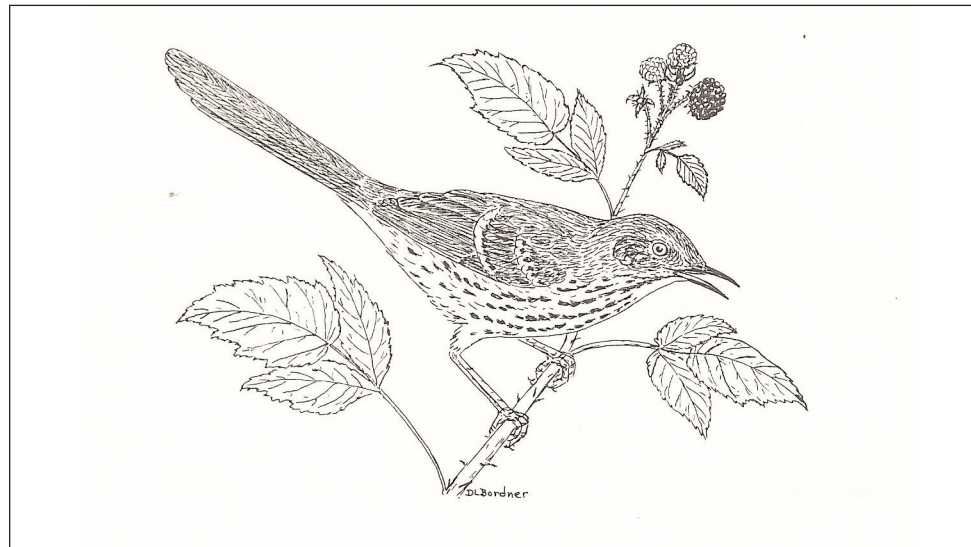
When I hear a brown thrasher singing, I recall a poem I read as a youngster: "There's a pretty brown thrush sitting up in

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a tree. He's singing to me; he's singing to me." In later years I learned that the bird the poetess was saluting probably was a brown thrasher rather than a thrush. However, the couplets in the verse are appropriate, for thrashers usually repeat their phrases twice. Or as one author put it: "It also tends to sing in couplets, voicing each phrase twice—though with so beautiful a song, the notes are well worth repeating."

Probably other birders besides me like to make up phrases to fit the song, such as "Look up, look up; right here, right here; come again, come again," and so on. Occasionally one will sing in triplets or quadruplets. Long ago Henry David Thoreau delighted in fitting words to the song. His theme for one brown thrasher's song was this advice to the farmer planting his corn: "Drop it, drop it—cover it up, cover it up—pull it up, pull it up, pull it up."

The brown thrasher is one of three mimic species that breed in Pennsylvania. The



gray catbird and the northern mockingbird complete the trio. While the brown thrasher may incorporate the notes of other bird-songs into its repertoire, it is not quite the mimic its relative the mockingbird is. Conversely, the thrasher is a far better singer than the smaller catbird.

During the 1980s, when we birders worked on the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas, we usually found it difficult to find thrashers in many of our breeding bird blocks. Our observations were confirmed in the account of the brown thrasher when the atlas was published. At that time Breeding Bird Survey routes also showed thrashers declining on those routes at a rate of 4 percent per year. In the past four or five years, I have heard or seen more thrashers than I have for a long time. Now birders are working on a new Breeding Bird Atlas. Perhaps when this atlas is completed, it will show a turnaround in thrasher populations.

The account in *Book of North American Birds* tells interested folks where to look and what to expect of this fascinating bird. "In late spring or early summer, anytime during that brief period when brown thrashers are courting, walk along a brush border, up a brushy slope, or down a winding lane

perfumed by hedges of multiflora rose. Listen for an eloquent song and, letting eyes follow ears, scan sapling tops for the lone singer. There the brown thrasher will be—conspicuous for once on his lofty perch, in rapturous song. With body trembling, head upraised, and bill wide open, he seems to pour his very soul into a paean of praise to his territory, his mate, his nest, and his nestlings-to-be. This impassioned singing will cease as soon as the eggs are laid, and it stops immediately if he realizes he is being observed."

In one of my bird books I came across a study made some years ago of the dietary habits of the brown thrasher. This survey showed that "the food consisted of 37.38 percent vegetal and 62.62 percent animal food, the latter nearly all insects. Beetles were eaten regularly the year around." Other insect pests were such caterpillars as canker-worms, cut-worms and hairy species including those of tent and gypsy caterpillars. Quantities of grasshoppers and locusts were eaten—and the list goes on and on.

The brown thrasher is both a useful and a lovely bird to have as a neighbor. I do hope the pair or their offspring will return to nest in our neighborhood next year.



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