



Hermit Thrush

Catharus guttatus



2018 marks the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, considered by many to be the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. In honor of this milestone, National Geographic, the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and BirdLife International are joining forces with more than 100 other organizations, including the National Park Service, and millions of people around the world to celebrate 2018 as the “Year of the Bird.” As part of this celebration, NETN’s Species Spotlight series will focus on a different bird species each month throughout the year.

What is it?

The state bird of Vermont and a little smaller than a Robin, the Hermit Thrush has grey-brown upperparts and a contrasting white underside. The breast and lower neck are slightly buff-colored with dark brown spots. They have a complete, thin and pale-white eye ring, and feature a rump and tail that are chestnut reddish-brown. Their bills are narrow and straight and are used to feed on insects and fruits.

The word “thrush” is thought to be related to the Greek verb meaning “to twitter,” a nod to the active nature of these small birds. They spend much of their time in the underbrush or forest floor, only heard or seen when perched on a branch singing their beautiful song.

When startled from the forest floor by a passing hiker, they often fly several yards away and land on a low branch. The give-away it is a Hermit Thrush that has been flushed is the way they flick their wings and quickly raise then slowly lower their reddish tails while cautiously eyeing the intruder.

Ethereal and Haunting

Members of this bird family are all known as eloquent songsters. Sometimes it can be hard to visually distinguish a Hermit Thrush from a Wood Thrush, Swainson’s Thrush or even a Veery. But when this relatively drab bird’s haunting song penetrates the forest, it is immediately recognizable. Considered by many to have the prettiest song of all singing birds, the sound of a Hermit Thrush has been described as flute-like and ethereal, and has led to it being nicknamed the “American nightingale”. It’s song has inspired many a poet and natural history writer. The 19th-century naturalist John Burroughs suggested to his long-time friend Walt Whitman that the Hermit Thrush song be used as a metaphorical device in the poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

Their song is often the first to greet you in the early dawn, and the last to serenade your evenings. It begins with a single high note, followed by a downward cascading, double-noted slow trill. That single note in the beginning of the song, which stands alone much like a hermit, is what helps distinguish it’s song from that of it’s cousins the Wood Thrush, Swainson’s Thrush, and Veery. Thrushes are able to accomplish their vocal acrobatics through the employment of a double voice box, unique to this bird family, called the *syrinx*. It allows them simultaneously voice independent notes which blend together, letting this incredible bird harmonize with itself.

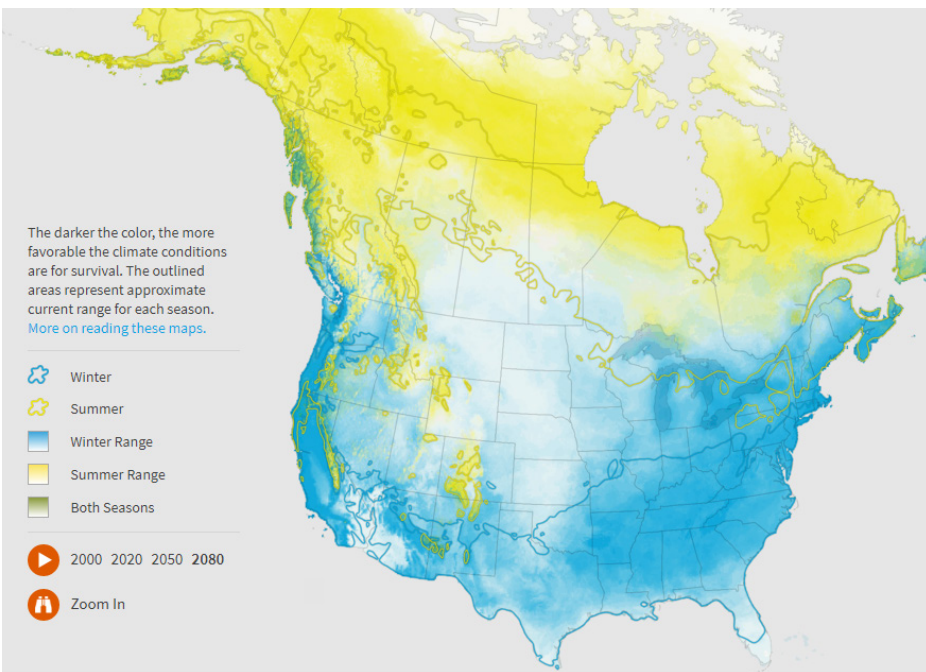
The Early Bird

The Hermit thrush appears to be the hardiest member of the Thrush family, as it’s the first to arrive in spring and one of the latest to leave in fall. If there is an adequate

The brown, spotted plumage of a Hermit Thrush allows it to blend in well with the sun-dappled forest floor where it spends much of its time foraging.



Ed Sharron



Audubon's climate models predict that as soon as 2080 Hermit Thrushes may no longer nest in the Northeastern United States. Click map to see animation.

food supply, some individuals even remain during winter in parts of the southern limits of its breeding range. It is no fan of the white stuff, however, and usually manages to keep just south of the snow-line. Historical eBird data shows sightings starting to increase in the northeast as early as March, but the peak of migration is during the month of April. This is when the males begin to search out prime territories with the best chance of attracting a female to mate with. They usually don't begin singing their songs until females arrive one or two weeks later however. Males defend nesting territory through their song, most often during mornings and in the fading light of evenings.

In the northeast, the Hermit Thrush's bulky, cup-shaped nest is typically built in a natural depression atop a small mound, such as a patch of clubmoss, on the forest floor. They often tuck their nests under protruding rocks or root masses to protect the eggs and young from the elements and prying eyes of would-be predators. It takes the female birds about a week to make the nest, which is constructed of grasses, bark, leaves, mosses, twigs, rootlets, hair, and lichens.

Three to six pale blue to turquoise eggs, sometimes with brown spots, are incubated by the mother, and hatch in 12-13 days. Both parents care for the chicks, but it is the female that takes on the bulk of the feeding duties.

Nowadays, people are so jeezled up. If they took some chamomile tea and spent more time rocking on the porch in the evening listening to the liquid song of the hermit thrush, they might enjoy life more.

- Tasha Tudor



Minder Cheng

The reddish tail feathers of a Hermit Thrush are a good field ID mark - especially if the bird is raising it up and down.

How are they doing?

Hermit Thrushes appear to be doing well across their territory. It is one of the most widely distributed forest-nesting migratory birds on the continent, and in fact is the only forest thrush that has seen a population increase or remained stable over the past 20 years. Likely because it seems to be less sensitive to habitat fragmentation and other pressures. While all that is good news, scientists warn that as the climate continues to warm, this singing sentinel of northern forests may be a rare treat to hear during Northeast U.S. summers since the bulk of their nesting will take place north of the border. Audubon's climate model predicts a contraction in summer range with a potential range expansion in winter. The model shows a staggering 73 percent loss of current summer range as soon as 2080. This likely would mean the loss of Vermont's state bird in

summer - one of 10 states that could be searching for a new feathered mascot by 2080 due to climate change.

For more information

-Listen to the songs of the Hermit Thrush: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hermit_Thrush/id.

- For info on NETN's long-term Breeding Landbird monitoring program see <http://go.nps.gov/landbirds>.



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