

(Will Stuart)



Turdidae the THRUSHES

Thrushes are known as some of the world's most alluring songbirds. Most nest and forage in various forested habitats spread around the globe. Others prefer more open areas. A total of 168 species of thrushes and their allies have been documented. Many build open cup nests of grasses and moss that are often lined with mud. Many are known to migrate long distances to and from their breeding grounds each year.

In recent years, researchers have been monitoring and analyzing flight calls that thrushes make during their nocturnal migration. Bill Evans, a researcher at Cornell University, has studied this in great detail. He learned that many North American thrushes repeatedly make distinctive “short whistled notes” while migrating at night. Observers can learn to distinguish between these call notes and to identify the various birds flying overhead in the darkness. Some observers go so far as to set up monitoring stations to record nocturnal flight calls, which they later analyze and differentiate using a library of digital sonograms.

Martina Nordstrand of Indian Trail, Union County, NC, spent a late night “moonwatching” during the full moon of September 15, 2016. At 11:35 p.m., she reported: “Just spent an hour outside on my driveway with my scope pointed at the full moon and my phone set to record. I had at the very least 20–30 birds fly across the moon within an hour; at one point I had 1–3 birds a minute. Lots of flight calls recorded, which I will have to analyze tomorrow. I had at least a few Swainson's Thrushes calling, a new yard bird! Anyway, if you are still up and reading this, I'd go outside and listen for a bit—I had flocks of birds calling each other!”

The American Birding Association reports that a surprising 26 species of thrushes have been documented in North America. Only seven of these regularly occur in the Carolina Piedmont, and they are described below. Three of these seven breed here. One is a winter resident and the other three are only seen here during migration. Birders should consult a field guide for specifics regarding the identification of these birds.

One additional thrush, the Bicknell's Thrush, is described in the Supplementary Bird List.

Note: The Varied Thrush is a western bird that is a vagrant in the eastern United States. It was first confirmed in South Carolina on October 6, 1993, at Edisto Beach, and there have been about four reports in that state since. One of these reports was of a Varied Thrush counted on a Spartanburg Christmas Bird Count in 1993. Another was reported on that count in 2007 with no details. The report was accepted by the South Carolina Bird Records Committee, but according to the committee, the observer's report “lacked some critical details.” As such, this species is not included in this book. However, individuals of this species have also been seen in North Carolina in Orange, Alamance, Harnett, and Henderson counties. Therefore, observers in the Central Carolinas should be “on the alert,” as it is quite possible a Varied Thrush could appear somewhere in this region.