

# Brown Thrasher in Dorset: a species new to Britain and Ireland

By C. S. L. Incedon

At 09.30 on 18th November 1966, on Durlston Head, Swanage, Dorset, my attention was attracted by an unusual call, a sudden and explosive *chat*. On investigating a wooded area above the cliffs, I soon located a strange thrush-sized bird feeding on the ground at a range of not more than 25 feet. It was uniformly reddish-brown above, with no white in the tail but two white bars on the folded wing; the under-parts were very strongly streaked, the irides yellow and the beak darkish. The tail seemed to be as long as the body and was kept slightly cocked. After consulting several books at home, including Oliver L. Austin and Arthur Singer's *Birds of the World* (1961), I decided that it was almost certainly a Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*, a view which was supported by Mrs. W. G. Teagle to whom I described it over the telephone. Other observers were informed and the identification was confirmed the next day by Dr. J. S. Ash and M. F. Robertson. This is a North American species not previously recorded in either Britain or Ireland; indeed, apart from an insufficiently authenticated report from Heligoland in 1836 (see *Brit. Birds*, 48: 9), it has not been recorded anywhere else in Europe. At 16.15 on 23rd November the thrasher was caught in a mist-net, ringed by F. R. Clifton and photographed by Dr. D. J. Godfrey. Over the next 2½ months it was seen by a great many other people—including D. I. M. Wallace who is familiar with the species in America—and it was last observed by P. Mays on 5th February 1967.

## DESCRIPTION IN THE HAND

I am indebted to F.R.C. for the following details noted when the Brown Thrasher was trapped on 23rd November. Unfortunately, it was examined rather late in the day and so it was possible to record only the salient characters before releasing it.

### *Plumage*

All the upper-parts were uniformly rufous (except for the forehead which was a shade darker) and richer in colour than those of a British Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos clarkei*. The sides of the head, however, were greyish with paler flecking. The chin was white; the throat, breast and belly were white with bold brown streaks; and there was a buff suffusion on the flanks. The outer webs of the primaries and secondaries

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ries were rufous and the inner webs blackish; the primary coverts were similar and some of the greater and median coverts had buffish-white tips which formed the two whitish wing-bars; the feathers of the bastard wing were uniformly blackish with a wedge of buff near the tips of the outer webs. The tail was also uniformly rufous.

### *Soft parts*

The bill was not really decurved, although it gave that impression in the field and is illustrated thus in Roger Tory Peterson's American book *A Field Guide to the Birds* (1947). The wholly black upper mandible actually curved down quite markedly, but the lower mandible, which was black with a pinkish base, was virtually straight along its lower edge and indeed curved up a little at the tip. The legs were greyish and the irides strikingly yellow.

### *Measurements and structure*

The following measurements were taken: wing 98 mm. (flattened chord); bill 20 mm. (from feathers); tail about 130 mm.; and weight 81 grams at 16.30 hours. The 4th and 5th primaries were longest and equal; the 3rd and 6th equal and 3-4 mm. shorter; and the 1st primary about 20 mm. longer than the longest primary covert. The outer webs of the 3rd-6th primaries were emarginated. The outer rectrices were about 20 mm. shorter than the longest and the penultimate pair about 6 mm. shorter, but there was considerable abrasion of the tips.

## FIELD NOTES

This section is a summary of my own field notes and those of J.S.A. and D.I.M.W. The Brown Thrasher looked similar in size to a Song Thrush, but at the same time it was slimmer and had a much longer tail. The whole of the upper-parts, including the tail, were uniformly bright reddish-brown. The under-parts were noted by me as white with bold brown streaks and this accords with the description taken in the hand, but J.S.A. and D.I.M.W. both considered the ground colour to look pale or greyish rather than pure white with the bold streaks of dark brown most marked on the flanks and less well-defined on the sides of the breast. The sides of the head were obviously greyish, the ear-coverts with dark margins, and the two pale wing-bars were conspicuous. The bill looked darkish and I entirely agree with the comments of F.R.C., quoted above, about its shape. At close quarters the noticeable yellow eye appeared as a light circle with a dark outer circle and the pupil forming a central spot. The long tail was constantly cocked, jerked upwards or flicked sideways.

All observations were within a radius of 60-100 yards of the original sighting, but the thrasher might easily have passed unnoticed in

the dense cover of holm oaks *Quercus ilex* near-by. On some occasions it was extremely skulking at the edge of this cover, but on others it took little notice of parties of observers and could be watched at close ranges as it fed on the ground under trees or on a wide path that ran through its territory. Attention was usually drawn to it by its two characteristic and often repeated call-notes. One was a rather chat-like, metallic *tobec* or *tschack* and the other a harsh 'husky-throaty' *tsch-aak* with almost the quality of a Jay *Garrulus glandarius* or Magpie *Pica pica*. Once it called repeatedly when it joined a group of Blackbirds *Turdus merula* and Song Thrushes which were apparently mobbing an unseen predator. Once, too, it was noted pulling worms out of the soil like a Song Thrush, but it was more usually observed feeding on the acorns of *Quercus ilex* at which it hammered with much vigour, throwing its head right back with each stroke and bringing its bill down vertically.

## IDENTIFICATION

Thrashers bear a certain resemblance to some of the babblers in the mainly Old World subfamily of Timaliinae, but these could be ruled out for several reasons, including their lack of wing-bars. The Dorset bird was clearly a thrasher and it remained to decide to which of the eleven North and Central American species it could belong. Only the Brown Thrasher, the Sage Thrasher *Oreoscoptes montanus* and the Long-billed or Sennett's Thrasher *Toxostoma longirostre* have the necessary combination of wing-bars and streaking below. The Sage Thrasher was ruled out because it is smaller and darker and has white tips to the tail, and the Long-billed Thrasher (which is more like the Brown) because it is less rufous and its streaking is clearly blackish.

## NOTES ON THE SPECIES

The Brown Thrasher is one of eight North American species of the genus *Toxostoma* within the New World family of the Mimidae. In all, there are 30 or 31 species in the family, which also includes the Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* and the Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*, and they tend to be residents or at most medium-distance migrants. The Brown Thrasher breeds from south-eastern Alberta and southern Quebec south to eastern Texas and southern Florida—in other words, throughout much of southern Canada and the United States east of the Rocky Mountains—and the species winters mainly in the southern parts of this area, usually withdrawing south of a line from north-eastern Texas to south-eastern Virginia, but occasionally staying on in southern Ontario, Montreal and Massachusetts. This summary of the range is based on Bent (1948), as is most of the information in the next paragraph.

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The Brown Thrasher is characteristically a skulking bird living in thickets, bramble patches, clumps of bushes, woodland edges and tangled undergrowth, almost always away from human habitation in the eastern United States, but sometimes inside cities further west and south. Its song is a succession of loud deliberate notes and short phrases, quite musical and with each phrase usually repeated once. The majority of its food consists of insects, including beetles, caterpillars, grasshoppers and so on, which are mostly taken on the ground, but it also eats seeds and fruit. When feeding on seeds it hammers them with its strong bill, so much so that if it comes to a bird table for sunflower seeds, of which it is very fond, the hammering can be heard for a long distance (H. G. Alexander *in litt.*). An analysis of 266 stomachs from various parts of North America showed that 37.4% vegetable matter and 62.6% animal food were taken (Beal, McAtee and Kalmbach 1916). Most nests are between two and seven feet above the ground (Erwin 1935), but at least in the eastern United States quite a number are on the ground. They are built of twigs, dead leaves and grass stems lined with rootlets and fine grasses, and the four or five eggs (two to six have been recorded) are very pale blue or whitish covered evenly and fairly thickly with small reddish brown spots. Both sexes incubate and feed the young: the eggs usually take 12-13 days to hatch and the young generally leave the nest after 10-11 days (Erwin 1935).

### REFERENCES

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