

Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis ruficollis* (Alan Harris)

# RED-THROATED THRUSH IN ESSEX: NEW TO BRITAIN AND IRELAND

BRIAN SMITH, SIMON D. WOOD & SIMON COX

**ABSTRACT** A first-winter male Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* of the red-throated nominate race occurred at The Naze, Essex, during 29th September to 7th October 1994 (*Brit. Birds* 88: 535). This was the first record of this race in Britain & Ireland, where, up to that time, there had been 30 records of the black-throated race, *atrogularis*.

At 08.50 GMT on 29th September 1994, BS caught sight of an unusual-looking, greyish thrush *Turdus* on steps ascending to the cliff-top cafe at The Naze, Essex. It was about the same size as a Fieldfare *T. pilaris*, with a similarly erect stance, and was uttering a quiet call, 'seep', but its most prominent feature was red outertail feathers, which were startlingly noticeable in flight. He took notes on the bird and then telephoned Steve Beary, who passed the news on to other observers.

The first to arrive, at about 10.20, was SDW, who relocated the bird, facing away from him on the top of a bush. It was disturbed by a dog-walker, but after about five minutes Tim Mendham, Andrew Thompson and Nigel Cuming arrived, and the bird provided fleeting views as it skulked in a cliff-face area of bramble *Rubus* and willowherb *Epilobium*. Alerted by a telephone call from SDW, SC then arrived and, gradually, all six of us obtained reasonable views. Although several of us thought that the bird had

rusty tones on its breast, no-one could be sure, but TM was the first to put forward the suggestion that it might be a 'Red-throated Thrush', the red-throated, nominate race of Dark-throated Thrush *T. ruficollis*. On one occasion, when it flew, AT commented that it resembled a giant Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*. At last, at about 12.30 hours, it finally moved out into the open, perched on top of some gorse *Ulex*, and provided the good views necessary for all six of us to be happy that the provisional identification was confirmed. At this stage, we informed the 'birdlines'. The thrush was seen only twice more on 29th September, but in the next eight days it increasingly frequented more-open areas, including gardens and the hedge bordering a caravan park, where it fed on the berries of bramble, Elder *Sambucus nigra* and hawthorn *Crataegus*, providing good views for well over 2,000 twitchers. This wonderful bird also posed obligingly for many bird-photographers (*Brit. Birds* 88: plates 170-173; 92: plates 3-6), and was sketched by SDW (fig. 1).

The following is a summary of our notes:

## GENERAL

A fairly large thrush, perhaps the size of a Blackbird *T. merula* or small Fieldfare, which it resembled in shape and stance. A washed-out grey-brown bird, with obvious rufous gorget and, when in flight, darker rufous-red outertail feathers. From behind and when in flight, looked like a giant Black Redstart.

## HEAD

**CROWN:** Washed-out grey, with hint of brown, extending down back of nape.

**SUPERCILIUM:** Fairly faint but defined orangey colour starting in front of eye as a thin fine feature but thickening over and behind the eye.

**LORES:** Dark, either black or very dark grey.

**EAR-COVERTS:** A tone darker than the crown and perhaps slightly mottled (SDW); fairly dark grey (SC).

**MOUSTACHIAL STRIPE:** Indistinct, colour much as supercilium.

**THROAT:** Background colour creamy rufous or buffish. Malar stripe formed by individual black feathers running down throat, splayed at lower end. Submalar stripe formed in same way. In between, fine cinnamon flecks also running down throat.

## BODY

**BREAST:** Extending from base of throat and halfway down breast, a rufous or brick-red, faintly 'scaly' gorget, sharply demarcated from belly, with grey feathers along the demarcation line at the sides; no rufous along the flanks. Remaining area of breast was 'dirty' off-white, with vague grey mottling, but this was not obvious when bird seen head-on.

**BELLY AND FLANKS:** Off-white, but 'cleaner' white than breast. No other markings.

**VENT:** Pure clean white.

**MANTLE AND RUMP:** Colour very similar to nape and crown.

**BACK:** As mantle.

## TAIL

**OUTER FEATHERS:** Deep rufous-red or orange on at least three pairs of outer feathers, not easily seen whilst bird perched, but very obvious in flight; possibly darker towards tips.

**INNER FEATHERS:** Colour as mantle.

## WINGS

**GENERAL:** Relatively long and sometimes held slightly drooped. Basic colour washed-out grey/brown. Underside of wing not seen.

**PRIMARIES:** Darker grey than rest of wings: the darkest wing feathers apart from alula. Tips darker than rest of feather; pale edges less obvious than on inner secondaries and greater coverts.

**SECONDARIES:** Washed-out grey, but the palest set of wing feathers, forming vague wing panel.

**TERTIALS:** Between primaries and secondaries in shade, but darker centres offset by pale edges.

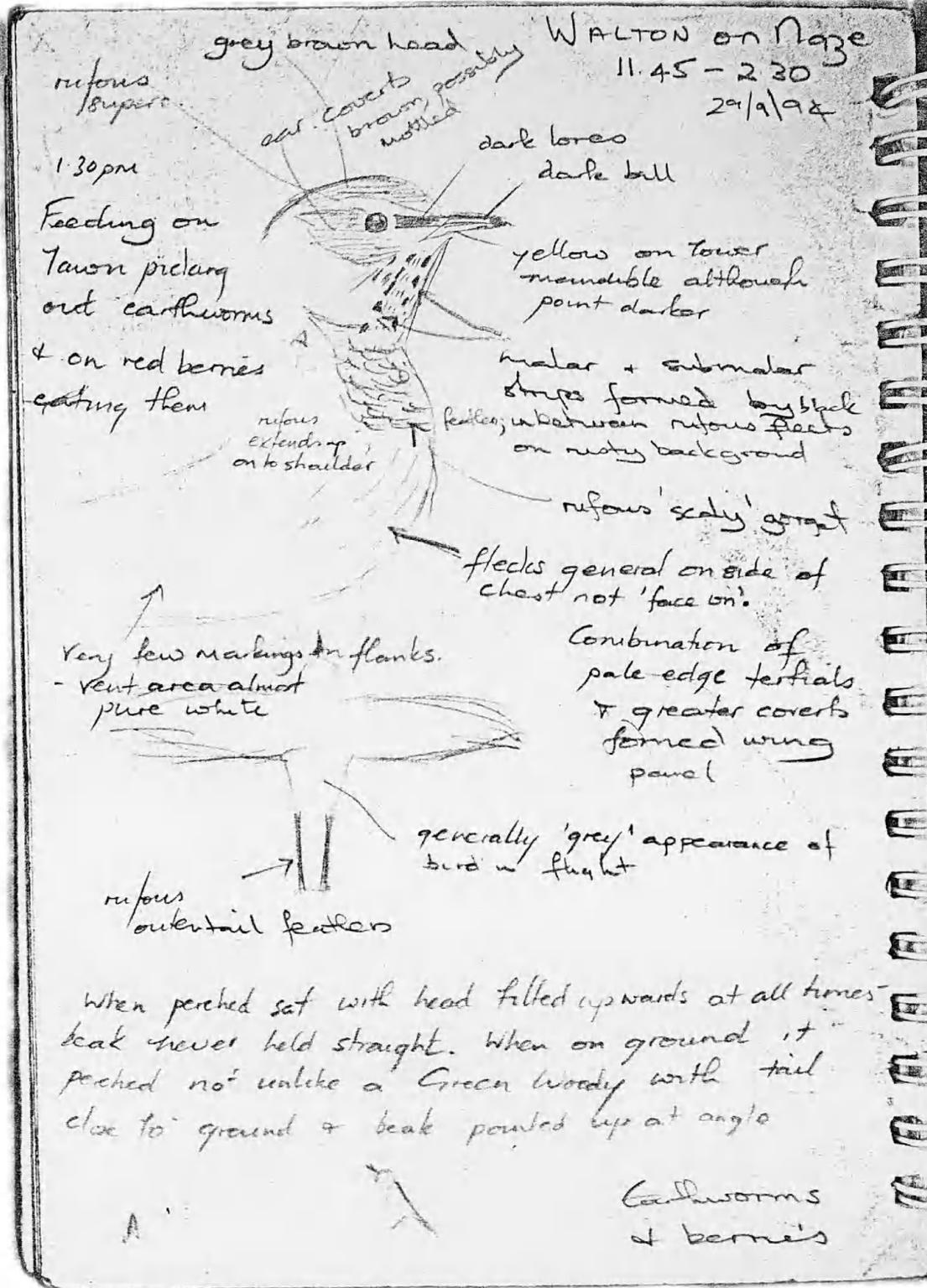


Figure 1. Sketches from field notebook of red-throated, nominate race of Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis*, Essex, September 1994 (Simon D. Wood)

29/9

bill v. dark but yellow, lower mandible

orange, super from beak to behind eye

dark feathers  
cinnamon buffy  
bill



cinnamon flecks  
v faint super  
orangy brown

dark lores

grey brown

dark lores

GC's + Tortails: pale edges  
dark centres

bill dark brown  
some yellow on mandible

wing

Secondary - generally paler than primary

diffuse black streak on yellow crown

cinnamon gorget  
pale sec. panel.



darker central feathers

outer tail feathers red/rufous

u/s dirty whitish grey flecked but not greatly

primary tips darker

like a redstart when it flows not visible on the ground!

legs pale perhaps horn/yellow

flocks on side but not front of breast

like a giant Black Redstart in flight

Call - low zip zip all that was heard

Size - nothing directly comparable, but 'looked' Fieldfare size, perhaps slightly smaller

B. Smith x  
S. Wood x  
T. Mendham x

In flight a generally pale grey bird

RED-THROATED THRUSH ? 1st Winter ♂

**GREATER COVERTS:** Colouring as tertials, but perhaps paler tips. Combination of pale edges to tertials and greater coverts formed fairly distinct, pale wing panel when bird seen from rear.

### BARE PARTS

**BILL:** Chunky. Upper mandible dark brown or black. Basal two-thirds of lower mandible yellow, with a dark brown tip.

**LEGS:** Yellowy/flesh, or brownish.

**EYE:** Dark.

### CALL

Only call heard was quiet 'seep' (BS) or a low 'zip zip' or 'szip szip' (SDW), with the quality of contact call of Redwing *T. iliacus*, but lasting for a fraction of the time.

### BEHAVIOUR

At times very skulking, disappearing for some while into low bramble and other vegetation. When perched, it would sit with its head raised slightly above the



3 & 4. First-winter male Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* of red-throated nominate race (and, below, Blackbird *T. merula*), Essex, October 1994 (above, Robin Chittenden; below, Graham Soden)





5 & 6. First-winter male Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* of red-throated nominate race, Essex, October 1994 (Robin Chittenden)



horizontal so that its bill was always pointing slightly upwards.

Posture when standing on the lawn was reminiscent of a Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* when perched on the ground. It was seen to feed on berries and also took at least three large earthworms whilst within the gardens.

The strength of colouring in the plumage suggests that the bird was a male, and the presence of two or three unmoulted juvenile outer greater coverts confirmed that it was a first-winter.

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#### EDITORIAL COMMENT

Professor Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the BBRC, has commented: 'There was no doubt about the identification of this stunning bird, which was accepted on first

circulation with little comment other than on the quality of presentation of the record and of the bird itself. This is not the first claim of this subspecies which the BBRC has considered. It is, however, far and away the best. Previous records have usually involved birds that were seen too poorly to be absolutely sure of the identity. In this case, not only was the bird seen well in a very distinctive plumage, but also a meticulous description was submitted, in addition to many excellent photographs.

‘Whilst this individual proved relatively easy to identify, this would not be the case in all plumages. The differences between females of Red-throated and Black-throated Thrush are much less obvious. The best separating feature is the colour of the outer two or three pairs of tail feathers, which are rufous on Red-throated but concolorous with the central feathers on Black-throated Thrush. In addition, many female Red-throated Thrushes show some rufous streaks on the throat and flanks, whilst the colour is a warm ochre on Black-throated Thrushes. Another complicating factor is the large overlap zone of the two subspecies. This produces a number of birds with mixed features and it is impractical to say whether an individual falls within the range of variation of one of the subspecies or is a hybrid between the two. Thus, the question of just how much red a female Black-throated Thrush can display is unclear (P. Clement *in litt.*).’

Tony Marr, Chairman of the BOURC, has commented: ‘Committee members were more concerned about the correct ageing of this bird (described as “stunning” by one member and as “an absolute cracker” by another) than questioning its identity. The majority view was that it was indeed a first-winter male.

‘There were 30 records of Black-throated Thrush in Britain and Ireland up to that date and some 156 from the rest of Europe. There have been 24 Red-throated Thrushes in Europe, and so this first record for Britain and Ireland is not too surprising.

The question of origin was naturally discussed, but the likelihood of escape from captivity was quickly dismissed in the light of knowledge that very few have been found in captivity and that the circumstances of its occurrence supported a wild bird. There could hardly be a better candidate – an East Coast location; a mid-autumn arrival after a record-breaking cyclone in the southern North Sea which had produced a northeasterly airstream; a first-year bird; and the arrival at about the same time of several Asian vagrants, including the equally famous first-winter male Siberian Thrush *Zoothera sibirica* in Norfolk just 11 days earlier.

‘Both black-throated and red-throated forms breed in central Siberia. The more northern black-throated breeds from the Urals east across western and central Siberia to the Lake Baikal area, and in the Caucasus; it winters from the Indian subcontinent, Burma and southwestern China west to Iran, and locally in Arabia. The more southeastern red-throated form breeds in southern Siberia from the Lake Baikal area southwest to the Altai Mountains; it winters from Afghanistan east across northern India and Burma to parts of north and west China.

‘Although the two forms are currently treated as conspecific by most authorities, their taxonomic status is currently under review. As well as separation within the breeding range (apart from some hybridisation in the area of known overlap), there are marked ecological differences between the two forms. Red-throated is a bird of sparse mountain forest and scrub, whereas Black-throated is more a bird of lowland forest and dry woodlands in subalpine steppes. There are apparent differences between their songs and calls, upon which more fieldwork remains to be done in the area of contact.

‘The record was accepted after a very straightforward single circulation, and the red-throated nominate race of Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* was admitted to Category A of the British List.’

