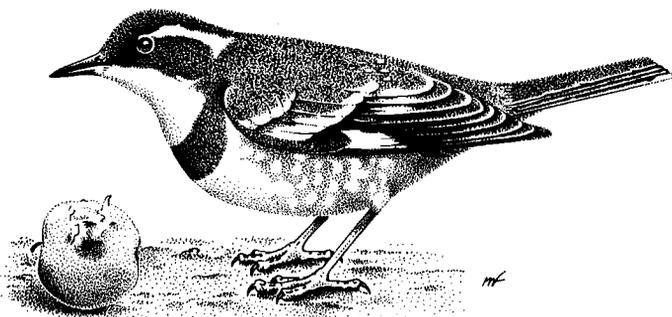


# Varied Thrush: new to the Western Palearctic



*S. C. Madge, G. C. Hearl, S. C. Hutchings and L. P. Williams*

On 14th November 1982, E. Grace was leading an RSPB field meeting at Nanquidno, near St Just-in-Penwith, Cornwall. At about 14.00 GMT, one of the ladies in the group drew his attention to an unusual thrush, which was dark grey with a white throat and supercilium, greyish breast-band and white wingbars. Consultation of field guides did not help; the nearest thrush to it seemed to be Dusky Thrush *Turdus naumanni*, but several features did not fit. Despite further searches by local birdwatchers, it was not seen again until the morning of 17th, when it was relocated by the late Bernard King, and later, independently, by GCH, SCH (who obtained a series of photographs, *Brit. Birds* 76: plates 37-39; 83: 109-111) and LPW. The possibilities of Siberian Thrush *Zoothera sibirica* or an escaped Aztec Thrush *Z. pinicola* (a Mexican species) were then considered, but the white throat, upper breast and prominent wingbars were inexplicable.

On the evening of 18th, SCH telephoned SCM and described the bird. It sounded as if it was some weird escape, possibly a peculiar plumage stage of Pied Ground Thrush *Z. wardii* (an Indian species). The following

continued...

morning saw a handful of us gathered at the spot; when the bird appeared, its banded underwing certainly suggested a species of *Zoothera*, but it was clearly none of the above possibilities, and we were all totally perplexed.

Returning home and looking at the literature, it suddenly dawned on SCM that the markings fitted Varied Thrush *Z. naevia* perfectly, and that, if the latter's orange areas were whitish, then that was the Nanquidno bird. Luckily, the markings were distinctive enough to show that no other thrush could possibly fit: it was indeed an aberrantly coloured Varied Thrush.

The thrush regularly visited Nanquidno Farm to feed on berries of a cotoneaster *Cotoneaster* in the garden. It had first been noticed by Miss Phillips of Nanquidno Farm, on 9th November, almost a week before being spotted by birdwatchers, and was last seen on 24th. During its stay, it was watched by a large number of people (and photographed on 22nd by Tony Croucher, plates 112-114), but many others were reluctant to travel to see what seemed to be an unlikely vagrant in an aberrant plumage. After careful consideration by the BOU Records Committee, however, the species has finally been admitted to Category A of the British and Irish list.

## Description

**SIZE AND SHAPE** A large, plump thrush, appearing a little smaller and slightly shorter-tailed than Blackbird *T. merula*.

**HEAD PATTERN** Forehead, crown and nape dark grey; lores, ear-coverts and sides of crown a darker slate-grey. Broad white supercilium from just above eye running back and curving down rear of ear-coverts, broadening above rear ear-coverts and ending abruptly.

**UNDERPARTS** Throat and upper breast clean white and unmarked. Relatively wide, dark grey breast-band below white of upper breast. Underparts below breast-band creamy-white; extensive grey overlapping scaling along flanks, widening towards rear to extend to tibia feathering and vent, merging with grey uppertail-coverts; central undertail-coverts unmarked white.

**UPPERPARTS** Mantle and back dark grey, with slight brownish cast. Rump, uppertail-coverts and tail dark grey, latter with small white tips to outermost feathers.

**WINGS** Upperwing dark grey, with two prominent white bars formed by tips of median and greater coverts; white patch at base of outer primaries, surrounded by a blackish shade; folded primaries and secondaries showed extensive brownish-grey-white panel along central portion of feathers, becoming darker grey towards tips and bases. Underwing whitish, with dark grey band along lesser coverts, greyish flight feathers, and grey band along centre of wing (precise pattern difficult to describe, as only glimpsed in flight).

**BARE PARTS** Bill blackish-brown, with paler yellowish base to lower mandible; legs fleshy-yellowish; iris dark.

It was a shy bird, spending most of its time feeding not far from cover, but it could often be seen in the open, feeding on fallen apples in a small orchard or devouring the berries of a cotoneaster in the garden of the farm. On one occasion it perched for some 30 seconds on the tip of a 14-m-high tree. When it flew, it kept low, skimming walls and flying between trees. It called rarely, but SCH twice heard a call, which he described as a low 'chuur, chuur'.

## *Age and sex*

Ageing and sexing the bird was difficult. Male Varied Thrushes have a



109-111. Varied Thrush  
*Zoothera naevia*, Cornwall,  
November 1982 (S. C.  
*Hutchings*)



broader and blacker breast-band than females; the Nanquidno bird had a broad, but grey, breast-band, hardly darker than the upperparts. A comparison of the photographs with skins at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, indicated that the bird was a first-year, and probably a male: the greater-covert bar is stepped, with smaller white tips to newer, innermost, feathers compared with larger white tips to older, outermost, feathers (adults would have greater-covert tip markings of equal size); the width of the breast-band, which appears slightly darker than the mantle in some of the photographs, suggests that the bird was a male.

### Distribution

Varied Thrushes breed over western North America from north-central Alaska, central Yukon and northwestern Mackenzie south to northwestern California, northern Idaho and northwestern Montana; they winter chiefly from southern British Columbia (although some winter as far north as southern Alaska in mild winters) to central, western and southern California. Two races are recognised: the nominate race breeds on the Pacific slope, and *Z. n. meruloides* breeds over northern and eastern portions of the species' range (AOU 1983). It is not possible to assign the Nanquidno individual to either race, as differences between the two forms are rather marginal, the nominate form being slightly more richly coloured and a little smaller than *meruloides*. In view of the proven tendency

for *meruloides* to disperse eastwards (see below), however, this is the most likely race to turn up in Britain.

In their native haunts, Varied Thrushes frequent dense damp forests, where they forage on the ground among mosses and rocks. In the autumn, they flock to feed on berries. In normal plumage, they are stunningly beautiful: slate-grey above with flaming-orange wingbars, supercilia and underparts, the latter bisected by a grey or blackish breast-band.

### **Easterly dispersal**

A glance at the species' distribution suggests that it is an unlikely candidate for transatlantic vagrancy. Since the early 1960s, however, it has become apparent that unknown numbers must move eastwards in late autumn, following river valleys, into the heart of southern Canada and northern USA. To what extent this is a recent phenomenon is unclear, but records date back to 1848 and it is possibly due only to increased observer coverage that records have snowballed so that the Varied Thrush has now become known as a scarce but regular winter visitor to bird-tables along the eastern seaboard, chiefly from Maine to New York. An examination of specimens shows that most, if not all, of the individuals occurring east of their normal range are of the eastern race *meruloides* (Keith 1968). Presumably, it is overlooked in the less-populated vastness that lies across the North American hinterland, but records exist right across the region. Most coastal occurrences are reported during cold-weather spells, so it seems not unreasonable to assume that the species is present in varying numbers in forest habitats in most, and probably all, winters and is forced into gardens only by hard weather.

112. Varied Thrush *Zoothera naevia*, Cornwall, November 1982 (A. J. Croucher)





113. Varied Thrush *Zoothera naevia*, Cornwall, November 1982 (A. J. Croucher)

### **The 1982/83 winter**

Published information for the 1982/83 winter is confusing. Bock & Larson (1983), in their summary of the features of that winter in North America, stated:

'Varied Thrushes were reported this winter from no fewer than seven inland and eastern regions—from Utah east through the Northern Great Plains to New York, Vermont, Quebec, Ontario, Virginia, New Jersey and Massachusetts. While these sorts of sightings occur reasonably often, there was an unusually large number of such accounts this winter. Conversely, Varied Thrushes were absent from most areas of the Middle Pacific Coast Region, and scarce in the Northern Rockies. This suggests that Varied Thrushes may have opted to move east instead of south.'

An analysis of regional reports from *American Birds* for the period in question does not, however, support this summary in respect of eastern occurrences, with comments such as 'an average year' from Western Great Lakes Region (nine reports) and a sparsity of reports from coastal regions. The mildness of the winter in general over the continent may, however, have been a contributing factor, the birds perhaps remaining well inland and within the forests. Certainly, this species (and American Robin *T. migratorius*) was largely unreported from its normal winter range in the west, no doubt a result of the largest berry crop for many years which kept thrushes well within interior forests.

The apparent paucity of records in eastern North America in winter 1982/83 does not, therefore, mean that the species did not disperse eastwards in that autumn. The fact that few Varied Thrushes were reported from their normal winter range indicates that they kept within

forested areas, feeding on the exceptional berry crops, the mildness of the weather keeping them out of urban 'yards'.

### **Nearctic species in Britain associated with the occurrence**

The year 1982 had been the best on record for American landbirds in Britain and Ireland, with some 30 individuals of 19 species (*Brit. Birds* 76: 527). The arrival of the Varied Thrush coincided with that of two American Robins (on Lundy, Devon, and in Shetland), two American Redstarts *Setophaga ruticilla* (in Strathclyde and in Lincolnshire) and a Green-backed Heron *Butorides striatus* (in Humberside), all within the first two weeks of November. Interestingly enough, the nearby Cornish locality of Porthgwarra had produced the first Chimney Swifts *Chaetura pelagica* for the West Palearctic only a couple of weeks previously (Williams 1986). In a winter which prompted comments on the scarcity of both Varied Thrushes and American Robins in their normal winter quarters, it is interesting to note that two American Robins arrived in Britain (one of which was also in the southwest), at about the same time as the Varied Thrush.

### **Plumage aberrations and escape potential**

Clearly, the Nanquidno individual was abnormal in plumage coloration: it completely lacked the stunning orange pigmentation so characteristic of Varied Thrush. Suggestions that its abnormal plumage was due to diet or captivity, although highly unlikely, cannot be totally discarded. It was a first-winter bird, and so must have been some five or six months old: perhaps too young for a captive diet to have had such a total effect on its

**114.** Varied Thrush *Zoothera naevia*, Cornwall, November 1982 (A. J. Croucher)





115. Varied Thrush *Zoothera naevia*, California, USA, January 1978 (W. Edward Harper)

coloration? At this age, if captive feeding were responsible, it seems likely that some orange would have been present somewhere, as only during moult would colourless feathers replace the normal orange ones. More plausible is the theory that the bird was a genuinely aberrant individual. Enquiries in North America have revealed that such birds do occasionally occur in the wild, although they are very rare. Law (1931) described a bird very similar in coloration to the Nanquidno individual; Jon Dunn (verbally) reports having seen only three or four ever with such plumage coloration; and Kimball Garrett saw one in California in January 1978, and one was found dead in Death Valley, California, about ten years previously (Guy McCaskie *in litt.*).

Varied Thrushes normally occur only within the confines of Canada and the USA, being merely a very rare vagrant in northern Mexico. Both Canada and the USA have very strict laws governing exportation of birds, and the only recent record of Varied Thrushes being imported into Britain was in 1975 (owing to stricter international regulations, it is highly unlikely that any would have been imported since then). The possibility of the Nanquidno Varied Thrush having been an escaped cagebird can, therefore, be considered extremely unlikely.

### **Acknowledgments**

We should like to thank the BOU Records Committee for information gleaned from their investigations undertaken when considering this record. Thanks are also due to those who



116. Varied Thrush *Zoothera naevia*, Alberta, Canada, May/June 1977 (Don Smith)

took part in supplying information, photographs and descriptions: Tony Croucher, Susan Roney Drennen, Jon Dunn, Mike Frost, Eric Grace, W. Edward Harper, Chris Kightley, Tim Manolis, Dr Kenneth C. Parkes, Will Russell, Don Smith and Phil Whittington. A number of other people helped supply information, on both sides of the Atlantic, namely John Bull (American Museum of Natural History), Laurie Binford, John V. Dennis, Kimball Garrett (Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History), Peter Grant, Dan Gibson (University of Alaska Museum), Kenn Kaufmann, Guy McCaskie and Dale Zimmerman.

### Summary

A Varied Thrush *Zoothera naevia* stayed at Nanquidno, Cornwall, from 9th to 24th November 1982, providing the first record of the species for the Western Palearctic. It was aged as first-winter, most probably a male. It was an aberrant individual, lacking orange pigment in its plumage; such aberrations do occur very rarely in North America. Although primarily a species of western North America, it is a scarce, but frequent winter visitor to northeastern North America (therefore, an individual reaching as far east as western Britain in early winter is plausible). Varied Thrush has been admitted to Category A of the British and Irish list.

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Peter Lansdown (Chairman, *British Birds* Rarities Committee) and John Mather (Chairman, British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee) have commented as follows: 'Despite this bird's visual impact being strikingly different from that of a normal-plumaged Varied Thrush, there were no real identification problems once it was established that such 'orangeless' individuals do exist. It was clearly a *Zoothera* and, of the members of that genus, the plumage-pattern fitted only Varied Thrush. A second circulation of the BBRC resulted in complete acceptance of S. C. Madge's identification, and this decision was unanimously endorsed by the BOURC. The record received two circulations of that committee, during which the file gathered much written discussion concerning the bird's likely origin, and the BOURC's opinion was to regard the Varied Thrush as being of natural occurrence. This corporate verdict was reached after considerable research and correspondence with several authorities in North America, and was based upon a combination of factors, most of which are covered in detail above. These include the fact that such "off colour" individuals are known to occur (albeit very rarely) in the wild in North America, the bird's age as first-winter, the known long-distance eastward migration of the species and its timing in relation to the Nanquidno bird (which is presumed to have overshot the east coast of Canada or the USA during its initial easterly movement), the other Nearctic species which arrived in Britain at about the same time, the fact that Varied Thrush does not currently figure in the bird trade, and the strict bird export laws of the USA and Canada in relation to the species' world range. Incidentally, the bird should not be referred to as "leucistic", which describes an individual with a reduction in the strength of its dark pigments. Acceptance of this Varied Thrush (*Brit. Birds* 82: 542; *Ibis* in press) resulted in the species being placed in Category A of the British and Irish list.' EDs