

AN EXTRA-LIMITAL NESTING OF THE WOOD THRUSH IN MANITOBA

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According to Godfrey, the northern boundary of the breeding range of the Wood Thrush prior to 1966 included southeastern South Dakota to central Wisconsin, southern Ontario, northwest to Sault St. Marie and southwestern Quebec to southwestern Maine.² More recently, this species has extended its breeding range into Nova Scotia.^{7 8}

Sight records in western Canada indicate that the Wood Thrush has been attempting to extend its range northwest, but these records have an unusual pattern. In Manitoba, it was recorded twice in 1934 at Whitemouth, in 1940 at Fort Garry (Winnipeg) and in 1942 in Winnipeg (Table 1). Apparently no further sightings were reported until 1973. On May 24 Pat O'Neil recorded the first authenticated sighting for Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.⁹ On October 5, E. L. Fox reported the second Saskatchewan record from Regina.¹ In 1974, O'Neil again observed a Wood Thrush in her yard on April 27, 28 and 29.¹⁰ There are no sight records for Alberta, not even hypotheticals.¹¹

In North Dakota, a singing adult was recorded on July 4, 1969, along the Red River.¹³ In 1971, individual birds were reported at Hannaford on May 15 and at Fargo on May 21, both in the southeast part of the state.¹²

MANITOBA STUDY AREA

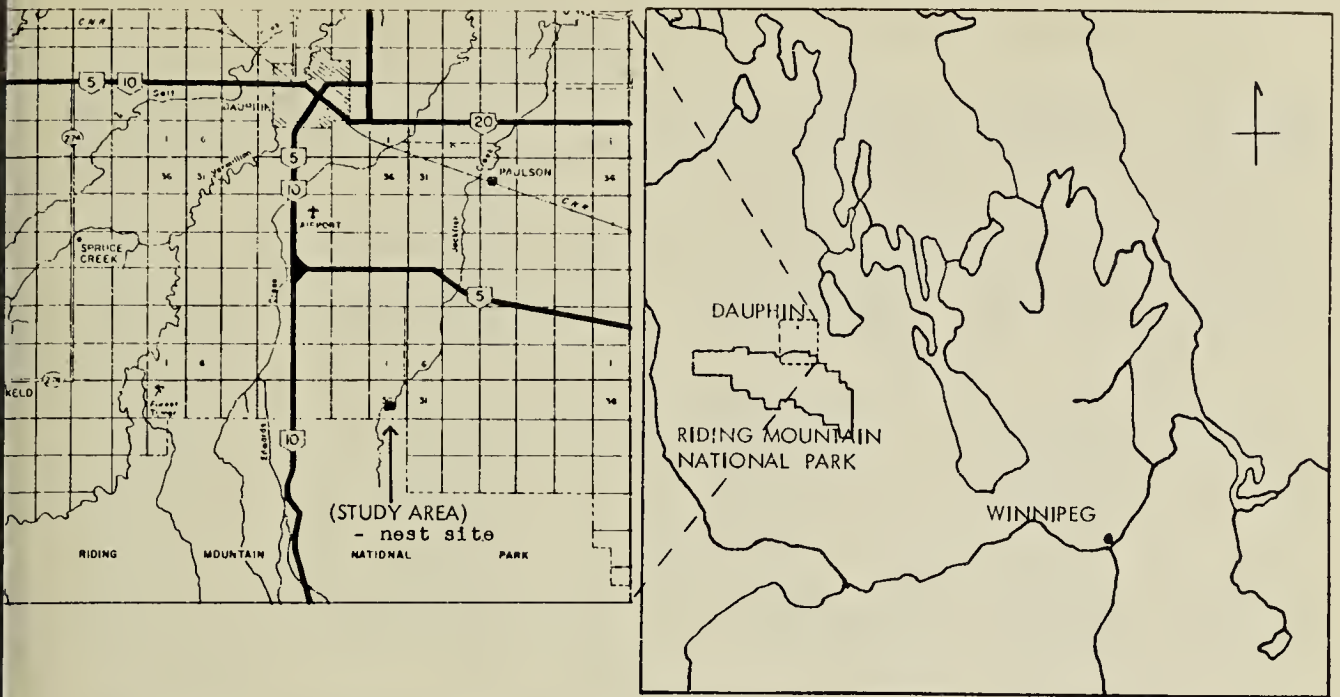
In western Manitoba, the eastern and northern escarpments of Riding Mountain rise abruptly from the surrounding aspen parkland. Within approximately 4.8 to 7.5 km the elevation increases from about 335 m a.s.l. at the foot of the escarpment to 670 m at the top of the plateau on the north and from about 425 m to 700 m a.s.l. on the east. With the exception of portions of the foot of the escarpment, the entire plateau is occupied by Riding Mountain National Park.

Mixed white spruce (*Picea glauca*) — trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) forest at the high elevations merges into dense aspen forest lower down and at the foot of the mountain. American elm (*Ulmus americana*), green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*) and Manitoba maple (*Acer negundo*) occur along streams at and near the base of the escarpment where these waters emerge from the gorges that cut through the escarpment. Stands of these large deciduous trees sometimes have associated semi-open areas consisting of shrubby bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), some Manitoba maple and small groves of aspen with clumps of shrubs, including hazel (*Corylus* sp.). A dense understory of hazelnut is found at the foot of the escarpment where trees, particularly aspen, are not too dense for growth.

Several species of birds generally associated with more easterly habitats have been attracted to these habitats at or near the foot of Riding Mountain. These have included the Scarlet Tanager which was first identified in the park by H. W. Copland (pers. comm.) on July 1, 1972. In 1975 a nest was discovered by Bob and Dave Carmichael (pers. comm.). Golden-winged Warblers and Indigo Buntings have been reported in the park by Walley.¹⁴ Both have been observed regularly during the breeding season by the writer since 1972.

The area in which the Scarlet Tanager nest was found in 1975 was studied by the author in 1976. This approximately 4-ha area had three habitat types including:

1. Elm-maple-ash-aspen habitat along Jackfish Creek which flows down from the top of the plateau and passed through the study area from southwest to northeast.



1. Location of Wood Thrush nest near Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba.

A semi-open bur oak-maple-aspen habitat with clumps of hazel-nut and other shrubs at the very foot of the escarpment and south of the creek. Scattered elms in a pasture north of the creek.

The study area (Fig. 1) was located approximately 0.5 km north of the north boundary of Riding Mountain National Park (51° 01'30" N., 100°0'00" W.).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the early morning of June 12, 1966, an excursion was made into the bur oak-maple-ash-aspen habitat in the northeastern part of the study area. The objective was to locate Scarlet Tanager taggers and find a nest. At approximately 0840 (D.S.T.) a thrush was heard. After several calls I realized that the bird was not a local species, but it could be a Wood Thrush. I had become familiar with the song of this species the previous winter from listening to R. T. Peterson's records "A field guide to bird songs".

The bird was not easily approached, but on the third attempt it landed 6 m away in an aspen and gave loud "Pit, Pit" alarm notes. From 15 m the bird

was studied with 7 x 50 field glasses. It was immediately identified as a large thrush with a rusty head and nape compared to the brownish back and wings. In side view, the large, round, dark spots on a white breast were clearly noted. As the bird remained perched for almost 20 seconds, other traits were observed including: a white eye-ring; a dull yellowish beak, especially the lower mandible for about 3/4 of its proximal length — the tip was black; and a white auricular patch with more-or-less horizontal, thin, black lines running through it. The Wood Thrush was positively identified. Upon leaving the area, the Wood Thrush sang, consisting of a flute-like note followed by a trill, emanated from two directions indicating the presence of two males. However, no more than one male was ever again observed during the study.

The Wood Thrush site was visited in the late afternoon, evening and early morning of June 15, 19 and 20, respectively, but no Wood Thrush was heard or seen on any of these trips and the birds were then believed to have been transients.

On the evening of June 23, when I was accompanied by S. A. Kentner, the Wood Thrush was again heard

Table 1 Sight records of the Wood Thrush in western Canada

Source	Observer	Date	Number of Birds	Location	Remarks
Lawrence ³	V. Latta	May 20, 1934	1	Whitemouth, Man.	Singing in a tree Observed at 9 m
Lawrence ⁴	V. Latta	Aug. 5, 1934	1	Whitemouth, Man.	Observed at 3 m
Lawrence ⁵	A. Haak	May 14, 1940	1	Fort Garry, Man.	Feeding on the ground with W throated Sparrow
Lawrence ⁶	Mrs. E. Humphries	Sept. 18, 1942	2	Winnipeg, Man.	"An excellent look"
O'Neil ⁹	Mrs. P. O'Neil	May 24, 1973	1	Saskatoon, Sask.	On ground 9 m Viewed by 9 others
Fox ¹	E. L. Fox	Oct. 5, 1973	1	Regina, Sask.	"Carefully studied"
O'Neil ¹⁰	Mrs. P. O'Neil	Apr. 27, 28, 29, 1974	1 (each day)	Saskatoon, Sask.	Apparently traveling with a large group of Hermit Thrushes
This report	W. J. Walley	June 12, 23, 25*, 1976	2**	Near Dauphin, Man.	June 12: one observed in an aspen at 15 m. A second bird was heard singing. (See text)

* Date of nest discovery

**See text

singing in the same area where it had been heard on June 12. Although the male appeared to be extremely nervous, moving quickly from branch to branch and delivering "Pit, Pit" alarm notes, we were both able to see its heavily spotted breast. Near dusk the pair was identified as both birds gave muted alarm notes while cautiously moving through the branches of the maples together and just overhead. Unwittingly, as it was later learned, we had been standing less than 15 m from the nest tree at that time. As we left the area the male gave an unusual variation of flute-like notes and trills.

According to Godfrey the Wood Thrush nests about 2 to 4.5 m up in mature deciduous trees.² Upon learning this, it was realized that much of the available cover could be eliminated as possible nesting sites including the shrub layer, the tree tops and the aspens as no cover occurred on these trees at that stratum. Near

0600 on June 25 a systematic search for the nest was begun. Eventually a nest with an incubating bird was found. It was conspicuously situated on a branch of a slim, approximately 12 m high maple, some 2 m from trunk and an estimated 5 m up. The tree was one of four maples of similar size in a close grouping about 40 m south of the creek. In poor light, only an eye-ring, a largely light coloured breast and dark lateral stripes on the throat were noted, indicating a few Wood Thrush. The male was singing from 75 to 100 m to the southwest of the nest.

Realizing the uniqueness of the nest in Manitoba, it seemed essential that the record be documented. Human activity in the vicinity of the nest would increase the chance of nest predation, but this prospect seemed highly probably anyhow. A family of Common Ravens including fledged young had been heard

regularly in the general area of a poorly concealed nest. Furthermore, at least one Red Squirrel had been seen within 20 m of the nest on June 25.

The nest was revisited in the late afternoon of June 25. When a ladder was ascended, the incubating female perched over the edge of the nest, flushed giving "Pit, Pit" alarm notes. The bird lit on a stump about 10 m away and, even without field glasses, the spotted breast and rusty head confirmed the identification. This was the only time that the female flushed from the nest. With the aid of a mirror taped to the blade of a key stick, four greenish-blue eggs were counted in the nest. Photographs of the clutch were not taken to avoid excessive disturbance. Had it been possible, it would have been impossible without a 5-to-6 m stepladder as the branch was too thin to support a person. Upon withdrawing from the nest of the nest tree, both adults were flushed giving muted alarm notes near-

ly checks were made on the nest the following few days, usually from a distance of about 35 m and little time was actually spent in the immediate vicinity of the nest. On June 26 the family of ravens was found in the area some 60 m west of the thrust. American Robins were frantically shrieking alarm. It was with relief that the female thrush was subsequently seen incubating her eggs. Earlier that morning she was photographed several times on the nest from no closer than 25 m with a 35 mm photo lens (400 mm x 2x = 800 m).

At 1300 on June 27 the species was identified and verified by Angus MacLean, Assistant Superintendent of Riding Mountain National Park. As a competent birder from eastern Canada, Mr. MacLean was familiar with the Wood Thrush. After observing the incubating female through a 20-power spotting scope from 35 m for about 10 minutes, the male flew in and perched within 0.5 m of the nest. For 20 minutes it posed motionless with its head toward the observers. This was the only time that both birds were

seen at the nest.

Little time was spent in the area again until dusk on June 28 when a quick check was made. At that time an adult, presumably the female, was perched on the edge of the nest with head low, apparently peering into the nest, suggesting that the eggs had hatched. However, an adult was never seen at the nest again. The following day, June 29, at 4:15 p.m., the nest was studied with the spotting scope from across the creek. In 20 minutes of observation, no activity was noted. The ground beneath the nest was then searched for young, but none was found. About this time the raucous croaks and squawks of the ravens were heard about 100 m to the south of the nest. At 6:30 p.m., approximately 2 hours after my arrival, the male Wood Thrush began to sing.

When the nest area was visited at 3:15 p.m. in June 30, the male was singing with unprecedented frequency and vigor. Again the nest was observed with the spotting scope from north of the creek, but no activity was noted and it was apparent then that the nesting attempt had failed. This was confirmed when the mirror was used from the top of the ladder revealed an empty nest. The male was then pursued and a recording of the song and alarm notes was obtained.

On July 1 the author remained in the area of the nest from 0600 to about 0800. During this time the male sang, but less frequently and with less vigor than it had on the previous day. The nest was photographed in situ and measurements were obtained. At a height of 5.9 m, the nest was somewhat higher than had been previously estimated. The nest tree, estimated to be 12m high, was one of four maples all of similar size, occurring in an area of almost 5 m.² Finally, the nest and supporting branches were collected.

The nest was not dismantled for analysis of composition; however, it was examined. The nest consisted of an exterior portion, constructed mainly of fine grasses and some dead leaves, and an inner solid cup loosely

lined with fine, dark rootlets. The exterior also contained a few rootlets and a little green moss near the top which extended about half way around the nest. A few heavier, light coloured rootlets occurred on the upper edge of the nest. Trash, which was reported by Godfrey, was not noted in this nest, but paper, etc. would not be expected as the closest human habitation was over a km away and the area is rarely frequented by humans.² The inner cup was solid and light coloured, apparently constructed of moist decayed wood and clay. According to Godfrey the inner cup is constructed of mud. The variation observed in this nest probably reflects the availability of suitable nesting materials, notably clay from the open bank faces of Jackfish Creek nearby. The inside cup dimensions at the top of the nest were 84 x 89 mm. The cup depth of 49 mm was measured with the rootlets removed as they had piled up at the bottom of the cup.

The area was visited in the evenings of July 8 and 15 to determine if renesting had occurred. However, in 30 minutes on each of these trips, there was no evidence that the thrushes were even in the area. Playback of the taped song of the Wood Thrush produced no results.

The nest, tape of the male's song and alarm notes together with the slides of the incubating female (of too poor quality for this paper), were shipped to W. E. Godfrey of the National Museums of Canada in Ottawa for analysis. Godfrey verified the record stating that the nest, slides and taped song and alarm notes were all identifiable as being those of the Wood Thrush. This is the first breeding record for Western Canada. Indeed, Godfrey (pers. comm.) states that he knows of no previous nesting records of this species in Canada west of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

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