

# ARIZONA'S FIRST AND SECOND RECORDS OF WHITE-THROATED THRUSH

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On 9 January 2019, Linda Grant discovered and photographed a White-throated Thrush (*Turdus assimilis*, Figure 1) at the Madera Canyon Picnic Area (Pima County) in Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains. This discovery is the first record of this species for Arizona. From 9 January through 24 February this bird was seen at the Madera Canyon Picnic Area and ranged as far north as the Proctor Road area, 1.7 km. On 23 February this bird visited the water feature at the Santa Rita Lodge (Santa Cruz County). On 28 May 2019, Lynn Jacobs reported a second White-throated Thrush from his Tucson yard (Pima County). This bird remained for 2 days. The Arizona Bird Committee (ABC) has accepted both records and considered these birds most likely to be distinct individuals (pers. comm. L. Harter).



Figure 1. First White-throated Thrush in Arizona, Madera Canyon, 9 January 2019. Photo by Linda Grant

Linda Grant is a relatively new birder who several years ago did a Big Year with a friend to see how many species they could photograph in a year. She lives in Green Valley only 19 km away from Madera Canyon and is familiar with the canyon and the birds there. She had seen several reports of an Olive Warbler in the canyon and decided to go there early on the morning of 9 January to look for it. After checking out the Whitehouse Picnic Area, she stopped at the Madera Canyon Picnic Area. It was unseasonably warm, and Grant was in short sleeves as she stepped onto the nature trail and crossed the first footbridge below the picnic area where the Olive Warbler had been reported. No water was running under the bridge. After walking about 25 m, she stopped to look at a Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) she had spotted. Then she saw something else in the leaf litter. Her first thought was that it was either a robin or a towhee. Experienced in immediately trying to get a photograph, she instinctively pointed her camera at the bird and viewed it through the 400mm lens. The bird turned and that was when she saw the black and white stripes on the throat, a white bib or collar, and a yellow orbital ring. Her first response was, "What the heck is that?" From previously looking through birding field guides, she knew it was not a bird expected north of Mexico, but thought it was in the thrush family. She shot some photos (Figure 1), and the bird flew into an oak tree. She showed her photos to Darwin Mayhew, a birder from San Francisco, who was passing by. He didn't recognize the bird, and by then it had flown downstream.

While Mayhew went downstream to look for the bird, Grant checked thrushes in the iBird Pro app on her phone. It looked like a White-throated Thrush, and she got excited when she saw that the range-map indicated it was found only from Mexico to northern South America. She showed her photos and those in iBird Pro to a couple of passing birders. They dismissed the sighting as being too far out of range. She then contacted Andrew Core, the Southeast Arizona Rare Bird Alert compiler for Tucson Audubon Society. She took pictures of the back of her camera with her phone so that she could text them to Core. However, she had no phone service, so took the road back toward Green Valley until she could get phone reception. She sent Core the photos and told him what she thought the bird was and where it could be found. He responded that he'd be there in an hour, and he sent a text to Laurens Halsey, an experienced birder then in nearby Florida Canyon. Grant met Halsey at the Madera Canyon Picnic Area parking lot to show him where the bird had been seen.

Meanwhile, the White-throated Thrush had returned, and Mayhew had taken some photos and shown them to birders at the nearby Santa Rita Lodge. Birders from there came down to look. Core also quickly got the word out, and many birders saw the bird the first day it was found. In the next 6 weeks more than 600 birders (eBird 2020), many from other states, saw and photographed the White-throated Thrush. During its 6-week stay, it moved around in a 1.7 km-stretch along Madera Creek from Proctor Road to the Santa Rita Lodge. It was reported and photographed at the latter location, which is in Santa Cruz County, only on 23 February.

Madera Canyon, where the thrush was found, is on the northwestern slope of the Santa Rita Mountains and is in the Coronado National Forest. The elevation where the bird was seen ranged from 1,350-1,425 m. The habitat in that part of the canyon is composed primarily of evergreen oaks (*Quercus* spp.), alligator juniper (*Juniperus deppeana*), Arizona sycamore (*Platanus wrightii*), netleaf hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*), and berry-producing shrubs such as skunkbush (*Rhus trilobata*), algerita (*Mahonia* spp.), and exotic pyracantha (*Pyracantha* spp.). Many birders observed the White-throated Thrush foraging in leaf litter on the ground; others saw it perched in trees, where it was often difficult to see well. The thrush was also reported feeding on pyracantha berries and hackberries (Figures 2a and 2b). Other thrush species are common in the canyon in the winter, and a few observers reported altercations in which the more timid White-throated Thrush was chased by a Hermit Thrush and an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). However, the White-throated Thrush was also observed several times joining up and foraging with variable-sized flocks of American Robins without any altercations.



Figures 2a and 2b. White-throated Thrush foraged berries in both netleaf hackberry, 24 February 2019 (l) and pyracantha, 10 January 2019 (r). Photos by Steve Hosmer/Macaulay Library at Cornell Lab of Ornithology (ML142504891) and Alan Schmierer

Amazingly, Arizona's second White-throated Thrush record came only 3 months later. Lynn Jacobs discovered one in his Tucson yard on 28 May 2019. He immediately went to the nearby Tucson Audubon Society bookstore to report the discovery, then returned home to get photos (Figure 3). He generously permitted birders to visit his yard to see the bird. It was particularly attracted to a water feature in the yard. Observers reported, however, that the thrush was skittish and disappeared for long periods. It remained at the yard only 2 days and wasn't reported elsewhere.



Figure 3. White-throated Thrush in Tucson yard, 28 May 2019, is second Arizona record. Photo by Lynn Jacobs



Both White-throated Thrushes found in Arizona were quickly identified by their characteristic features: the size (24 cm) and shape of an American Robin; brown or grayish-brown upperparts, including the head; heavily streaked white throat; short white collar on upper breast; buffy breast and flanks; narrow yellow eye ring; bill mostly dark, with yellow along the cutting edge and midmandible; and yellowish gray legs (Figure 4).



Figure 4. White-throated Thrush is characterized by brown upper parts, striped throat, white collar, and yellow eye-ring, 28 January 2019. Photo by Laurens Halsey

The White-throated Thrush is found from northern Mexico to northwest Ecuador. It inhabits a wide range of forest types, usually preferring dense cover and moist forests, and is not often seen in the open (Howell and Webb 1995, Collar et al. 2020). It is a mid- to high-elevation breeder and regularly moves to lower elevations in the winter to search for food. In Mexico, it is common in appropriate habitat, but other than seasonal elevational movements, is relatively sedentary. The nearest Mexican reports to Madera Canyon are about 420 km away at Yécora in the northern state of Sonora (eBird 2020).

The first U.S. record of White-throated Thrush (called White-throated Robin then) was in Laguna Vista, Cameron County, Texas on 22 February 1990. It was photographed and well documented by a few experienced observers at a private residence. It mingled with several Clay-colored Thrushes (*Turdus grayi*) attracted to a bunch of grapes near a bird feeder (Lasley and Krzywonski 1991). The closest known White-throated Thrush population to Cameron County is in the mountains of southern Tamaulipas, approximately 300 km south of Brownsville, Texas. Since the 1990 report, 18 more sightings have been documented in Texas; the most recent were 4 different individuals in February 2016 (Carpenter 2016 and 2017). All the Texas records have been in 3 southern counties. Most of the Texas reports were in January-March, like the Madera Canyon record (Figure 5). The latest Texas spring sighting of 12 April 2008 was not as late as the late May Tucson record.

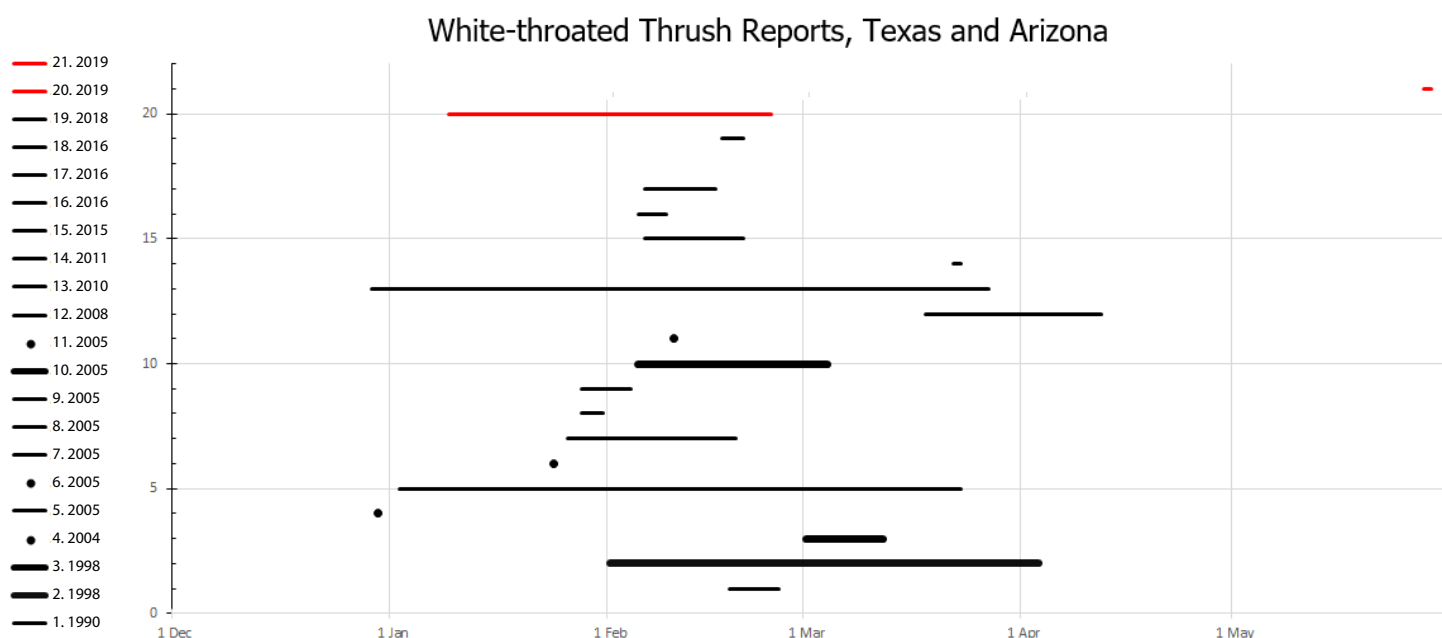


Figure 5. The 21 reports of White-throated Thrush in Texas (black) and Arizona (red) are at similar dates. Source: eBird 2019.

One matter the ABC had to consider in evaluating the Madera White-throated Thrush as Arizona's first record was whether it could have been an escaped caged bird. Thrushes are often kept in captivity, so it must be considered. White-throated Thrushes are shy in the wild, and the Madera bird was reported to be wary. Its plumage was in good shape and didn't appear to have signs of cage wear. Moreover, its lighter head and upperparts, less contrasting white collar, and brighter yellow bill, compared with the subspecies found in eastern Mexico, was typical of the subspecies (*T. a. calliphthongus*) found in northwestern Mexico, which would be the most likely origin of a wild bird. Its tail feathers were pointed, suggesting it was a first-year bird, another reason for accepting it as a wild vagrant. Recognizing that a White-throated Thrush had made its way to Arizona made accepting the Tucson bird as a second record more straightforward. There, the main question was whether it was the same bird. The length of time between the Madera and Tucson sightings, without any reports elsewhere, makes it unlikely that the reports were of the same bird.

The 2 Arizona White-throated Thrush reports are the northernmost records for this species. Many Mexican bird species are gradually moving north, perhaps due to long-term and short-term climate change. Whatever the reason, we should anticipate seeing more White-throated Thrushes and other visitors from Mexico.

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