

ARIZONA'S FIRST RECORD OF AN ORANGE-BILLED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH

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On 15 June 2022, I observed the first Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush (*Catharus aurantirostris*) to be documented in Arizona (Figure 1). It was in my backyard high in the Mule Mountains near Bisbee in Cochise County (31° 27' 51" N, 109° 57' 22" W).

While watching birds in my backyard early in the morning, I noticed movement—a thrush-like flick of wings—in the apple tree (*Malus domestica*). The bird had a russet-colored back and tail, and I immediately thought Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), although a Hermit Thrush in my yard that late in June seemed odd. Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) was also a possibility but would be casual in June (Tucson Audubon Society 2011). I'm familiar with both species, having seen and photographed them hundreds of times.

When the bird turned toward me its breast showed no spots. Its reddish back and uniformly gray breast were like no thrush I'd ever seen (Figure 2). As the bird skulked through the apple tree, I followed it with my camera. It then flew above the water feature to a dead branch in the chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) and faced me. I noted its long pinkish legs and short tail and the bright orange bill and eye-ring. The thrush ducked through the branches and thick leaves of the chokecherry and slipped across the rocks to the fountain's pool where it dipped its bill into the water. Then, it flew to the top of the fountain (Figure 3) and drank from the trickling spout before flying off to the southeast.

In 3 minutes, I had taken 86 photos but had no idea what species the bird was—except some kind of "thrush." I was certain, however, that I had never seen it before. I showed the photos to my wife, and we consulted our field guide (Sibley 2014), and there it was, we both agreed, on page 441 among the thrushes and robins—an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, a "very rare visitor from Mexico."

I reported the rarity along with my photos on eBird (eBird 2022) within the hour and sent a note to the eBird reviewer for Cochise County, Mark Stevenson. I invited anyone interested to come to my yard, and 30-40 people did throughout that day and the next. However, the thrush never returned.



Figure 1. Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, 15 June 2022. First Arizona record. Photo by Ken Lamberton



Figure 2. Orange bill and eye-ring, long legs, rufous tail, and gray breast mark this Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, 15 June 2022. Photo by Ken Lamberton

My yard, where I've documented 169 bird species in the 12 years I've lived here, looks over the usually dry Banning Creek in the Mule Mountains at 1716 m in elevation. Fruit trees enclose the back area; apple (*Malus domestica*), pear (*Pyrus sp.*), native elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) and chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) lean over the fountain and pond. Two giant Emory oaks (*Quercus emoryi*) spread branches over the house. Beyond the enclosed yard, Emory and Mexican blue oak (*Quercus oblongifolia*), pinyon pine (*Pinus edulis*), alligator juniper (*Juniperus deppeana*), pointleaf manzanita (*Arctostaphylos pungens*), and Arizona madrone (*Arbutus arizonica*) comprise a mixed dry woodland typical of the Madrean pine-oak woodland found in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico and the sky islands of the U.S. Southwest. These dry foothills and highlands in Sonora, Mexico, are the preferred habitat of the Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush (Howell et al. 2014).

The Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush is a tropical and subtropical woodland bird that ranges from northern Mexico south to Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela (eBird 2022). For decades, and in every month of the year (especially June through August when breeding occurs) many people have seen and photographed the bird 500 to 600 km south of Arizona in Yécora and Alamos, Sonora. eBird records show scores of sightings, with birders logging as many as 12 individuals, including nests with young, in 4 hours of birding.



Figure 3. Fountain surrounded by lush vegetation attracted the Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, 15 June 2022. Photo by Ken Lamberton

In May 2022, 3 weeks before my sighting, a birder reported 2 Nightingale-Thrushes on the same day, one at Rio Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, and the other at Cueva de la Olla, Chihuahua, both locations about 240 km southeast of the Mule Mountains (eBird 2022). Since these are the only 2 reports in Sonora north (by several hundred kilometers) of the large breeding populations around Yécora and Alamos, it's possible these birds (and the U.S. sightings) represent a within-breeding-season dispersal outside their normal geographic distribution.

The first 2 U.S. sightings for Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush were in Texas, one on 8 April 1996 at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Cameron County, where it was mist-netted, banded, and released (Lasley et al. 1996), and the second, a window-killed specimen, on 28 May 2004 at Edinburg, Hidalgo County (Lockwood et al. 2005). The Texas Bird Records Committee (TBRC 2022) accepted both records.

Surprisingly, the next report came from South Dakota, more than 1,500 km from the Mexican border, a single male observed between 10 July and 19 August 2010 along Iron Creek at Spearfish Canyon, Lawrence County (SDOU 2010).

Finally, the fourth U.S. record is from New Mexico. On 18 July 2015 at Nutria Canyon in the Zuni Mountains of McKinley County, a Nightingale-Thrush was seen and heard multiple times between 0900 and 1830 but never relocated on subsequent days (NMOS 2015). The New Mexico Bird Records Committee accepted the Nightingale-Thrush report (Williams 2022).

In Arizona, a hypothetical report in mid-April 1974 in the Pinal Mountains, Gila County, was not submitted to or reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee (ABC; Monson and Phillips 1981). The Mule Mountains report, if accepted by the ABC, will be the first for Arizona and the fifth for the United States.

There is often concern that any first record is an escaped caged bird. I considered the possibility but decided it was unlikely for 2 reasons. First, the Nightingale-Thrush showed no signs of unusual feather or bill wear and was very wary, keeping its eyes on me for most of its 3-minute visit. Secondly, the 4 accepted U.S. records occurred from April through August, which makes the June Arizona sighting fit into a pattern of spring/summer vagrancy.

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