

ARIZONA'S FIRST RECORD IN OVER 90 YEARS OF A GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH

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On 2 June 2024, Sochetra Ly discovered the first Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*; Figure 1) to be documented in Arizona in 90 years. It was in the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness in the Galiuro Mountains, Pinal County, which is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The Arizona Bird Committee has accepted it, establishing a second record for Arizona and the first to be photographed and sound recorded.

Ly first observed the Gray-cheeked Thrush in midmorning about 1.6 km up Aravaipa Canyon from the west trailhead. The temperature had already reached 38 °C, but the riparian canopy provided welcome shade. While using the Merlin Bird ID app by Cornell Lab of Ornithology to record a Gray Hawk (*Buteo plagiatus*) calling, the app picked up a Gray-cheeked Thrush. Ly thought the identification was an artifact of starting the recording and therefore an error, so he ignored it given the unlikelihood of this species occurring in Arizona. (Since this observation the Merlin app was reprogrammed and will no longer suggest birds that are this far out of range, even when they are present). A few minutes later Ly saw the back of a thrush. It turned around, giving a quick view of its face and breast with buffy spots, before it flew upstream. Ly's initial impression was a Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*), although he had detected Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) at this location in the fall and winter and did not rule that species out as a possibility.



Figure 1. Gray-cheeked Thrush, Aravaipa Canyon, Pinal County, 2 June 2024. The first photograph of this species in Arizona. Photo by Sochetra Ly

Recalling what he had thought was an erroneous identification of a Gray-cheeked Thrush from the Merlin app, Ly played the Gray-cheeked calls from the Sibley Birds 2nd Edition app: "Call 1 and Flight Call." The thrush responded immediately, flying 3 m in front of him and started to vocalize. Ly began recording its high-pitched "pzeers" at 0917. He also played Swainson's Thrush calls, and there was no response. He then played Gray-cheeked Thrush calls from the Merlin app that had been recorded in Alaska. The thrush responded again. The bird was relocated a while later at which point photos and recordings (Ly 2024) were obtained, confirming the identification as a Gray-cheeked Thrush. Depending on its posture, the thrush displayed a faint or no eye ring, unlike the more defined eye ring of Swainson's Thrush and Hermit Thrush. The Gray-cheeked Thrush had no rufous on its primaries or tail as Hermit Thrush and the Swainson's Thrush's western russet-backed subspecies (*ustulatus* group) do. The Aravaipa thrush also had a grayer face than Swainson's or Hermit thrushes. The spotting on the breast was comparable to Swainson's Thrush, but photos showed the bird's flanks are darker green/gray than the rufous on Swainson's (Sibley 2016).

On the following day Levi Plummer refound the Gray-cheeked Thrush at 1303 foraging along Aravaipa Creek near where Ly had seen it. No playback was used, but the bird twice made the same call that had been recorded the day before. It was mostly silent as it moved along the creek for a short time and then retreated upslope to the south for about 15 minutes before returning to the creek. Plummer had his best views of the thrush at 1320 and was able to photograph it (Figure 2). Earlier in the morning he photographed a Swainson's Thrush (Figure 3) along the creek and the comparison between the 2 birds was evident. Several birders unsuccessfully looked for the Gray-cheeked Thrush throughout June, including the 2 days immediately after Plummer's report.



Figure 2. Gray-cheeked Thrush, Aravaipa Canyon, 3 June 2024. Photo by Levi Plummer



Figure 3. Swainson's Thrush, Aravaipa Canyon, 3 June 2024. Photo by Levi Plummer

In Aravaipa Canyon the creek flows year-round, and riparian vegetation is lush and dominated by Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), Arizona sycamore (*Platanus wrightii*), velvet ash (*Fraxinus velutina*), and Gooding's willow (*Salix goodingii*). The elevation where the Gray-cheeked Thrush was seen is 793 m.

The only previous Arizona record of Gray-cheeked Thrush was a bird collected by Alex Walker on 11 September 1932 at the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon near Portal in the Chiricahua Mountains, Cochise County. That bird was a male in postjuvenile plumage and remains at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (Bent 1949, Phillips et al. 1964; J. Alexander pers. comm.).


Gray-cheeked Thrush breeds in northern Canada and Alaska and is a common migrant through eastern United States and sparingly west to the western Great Plains. It winters in northern South America. There is only a scattering of records west of the Rocky Mountains (Whitaker et al. 2020). Utah and Nevada have no accepted records (BUBU Listing 2025; GBBO 2024). California has 26 accepted records, all but 2 in September and October (CBRC 2025). New Mexico has 9 accepted records, all in May and all east of the Continental Divide in the eastern plains, from the Pecos River to the west Texas line (Williams and Baumann 2023). Of the 73 accepted records from Colorado, all but 3 are east of the Rocky Mountains, and those 3 are in the eastern slope of the Rockies (CoBRC 2025).

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