

Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*)

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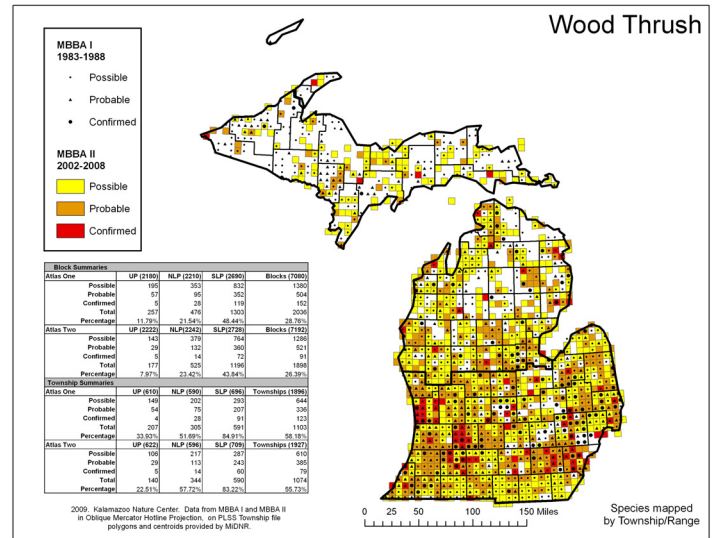


Belle Isle Park, Wayne Co., MI
May, 2009 © Willie McHale

In introducing the Wood Thrush painting in his *Birds of America* series, John James Audubon stated: “Kind reader, you now see before you my greatest favourite of the feathered tribes of our woods. To it I owe much. How often has it revived my drooping spirits...” (Audubon 1840-1844). Audubon’s sentiment is a popular one, as the Wood Thrush is a favorite bird of many. It nests in deciduous and mixed woods in the U.S. east of the Mississippi, except for southern Louisiana and peninsular Florida, as well as southeastern Canada (Roth et al. 1996). This species winters primarily from Mexico to Panama.

Distribution

Wood Thrushes can be found in nearly any upland mesic woodland, but several characteristics are especially attractive to them. These include tall trees (greater than 16 m, or 50 ft), a high diversity of deciduous tree species, a moderately dense shrub layer, and fairly open forest floor with moist soils and decaying leaf litter (Roth et al. 1996). In MBBA I, Wood Thrushes were located breeding in wet and mesic forests, were less common in dry woodlands, and were absent in coniferous forests.



[\(Click to view a comparison of Atlas I to II\)](#)

Over the last century, the distribution of Wood Thrushes in Michigan has not changed substantially. Barrows (1912) considered it most abundant in the southern and middle parts of the state. Wood (1951) noted it as common in the LP, though irregular in northern counties, and rare and local in the UP, a status echoed by Payne (1983). This pattern held in MBBA I.

MBBA II data is in agreement as well, showing that Wood Thrushes are concentrated in the southern two-thirds of the state. Wood Thrushes were found in considerably fewer townships in the UP in MBBA II than in MBBA I, but the number of confirmations was very similar. The distribution of Wood Thrushes was also similar in Ontario’s two Atlas efforts (Friesen 2007).

Breeding Biology

Wood Thrushes build cup-shaped nests, often adorned with strips of plastic in urban areas, in concealed, shady spots in trees or shrubs. Nests are typically lower than 6 m, and the density of surrounding vegetation at the height of the nest is often higher than that of nearby locations at the same height (Roth et al. 1996). Wood Thrushes usually attempt two broods per season, and on rare occasions will reuse a nest (Roth et

al. 1996, Craves 1998). First broods are generally initiated during the month of May and second broods are laid in June and July (Roth et al. 1996). Eggs are a uniform turquoise-green and three to four eggs comprise a typical clutch (Roth et al. 1996).

Abundance and Population Trends ([Click to view trends from the BBS](#))

Wood Thrushes are often used as an icon of neotropical migrant declines. Many authors note a population slide, based on BBS data, over much of the species' range since the mid-1960s. Considering just the span between the two Michigan Atlas periods (1983 to 2007), survey-wide BBS trends indicate a significant decline of 1.4% annually, but trends vary geographically. In the Midwest (USFWS Region 3), there was a significant annual increase of 1.2%. The trend over the same period in Michigan was also positive (1.5%) and near-significant (Sauer et al. 2008).

A different analysis by the U.S. Forest Service (USDA 2004) looked at relative abundance in Midwestern states (all states represented in USFWS Region 3 except Ohio) from 1970 through 2000. It described a region-wide increase of 34%, but changes depended on geography ranging from decreases of 100% to increases of 950%. For the southern part of Michigan, where Wood Thrushes were most common in MBBA II, this assessment indicated increases in relative abundance except in the Thumb and counties bordering Lake St. Clair. In contrast, Atlas data showed little change in the number of townships recording Wood Thrushes in the Thumb area between the two Michigan Atlas periods.

Conservation Needs

The Wood Thrush is on the National Audubon Society's 2007 WatchList of declining birds; it is considered a priority species in the Boreal Hardwood Transition physiographic area, which includes the UP and NLP, by Partners in Flight

(PIF 2008); and it is listed as a species of greatest conservation need in Michigan's Wildlife Action Plan (Eagle et al. 2005).

Habitat fragmentation is considered a major cause of Wood Thrush population declines. Although apt to nest in small woodlots and even residential areas, Wood Thrushes are considered area sensitive (Roth et al. 1996). Nests in small or fragmented tracts are frequently unsuccessful due to high rates of parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) and heavy predation (Weinberg and Roth 1998). Predation and especially cowbird parasitism rates are extremely variable geographically. These rates are often tied to the degree of fragmentation, since the most important variables for successful Wood Thrush nesting include the amount of core habitat and total forest cover in the larger landscape and the distance from the nest to a forest edge (Driscoll et al. 2005).

Wood Thrush nesting success has been well studied in the Great Lakes region. In the western Great Lakes in particular, the twin threats of cowbird parasitism and predation can result in few Wood Thrushes fledging young in small woodlots or forest fragments (Robinson 1992, Donovan et al. 1995). In Ontario, some studies suggest that small woodlots are not as detrimental to Wood Thrushes (Friesen et al. 1999, 2005). The Rouge River Bird Observatory (RRBO) followed the reproductive success of Wood Thrushes for seven years on the campus of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, a small, fragmented urban forest. Over 70% of the nests suffered from predation. However, cowbird parasitism was light (13%), and half the nests that were parasitized fledged both Wood Thrushes and cowbirds (RRBO, unpubl. data).

Wood Thrushes may be vulnerable to tropical deforestation, as they are most abundant on their wintering grounds in primary and mature second-growth woodlands (Roth et al. 1996). Rappole et al. (1994) documented a substantial

reduction in forested habitats and corresponding declines in numbers of Wood Thrushes in the late 1980s in the northern portion of the wintering range.

The variability of population trends and the irregularity of consistent reactions to some habitat characteristics over space and time indicate we need to pay even more attention to Wood Thrush numbers going forward. Overall, it seems that the preservation of large contiguous forest blocks is the most important step we can take to insure that this species remains for future generations to designate as their favorite bird.

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