

Rcd 12/15/99
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1999 - 154

DOCUMENTATION OF RARE BIRD SIGHTING

Species: Eastern Towhee *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*

ACCEPT 70

Dates: Oct. 16-18 1999 **Time seen:** 11:45 am - 11:50 am Oct 16; 0900-0910 am Oct 17 (but only very brief looks);
Oct. 18: heard, not seen. 4 p.m.

Locality: N. Willow Creek, Willow Lake Drive, Franktown **Latilong:** 39104 **Optical equipment:** Binoculars, 8 x 42.

Number of birds seen: One **Sex:** Male **Distance from bird:** 30-50 feet

Light conditions: Oct. 16: Excellent: sunny bright **Weather at time of observation:** Oct. 16: Sunny, bright
Oct. 17: Cloudy but good light Oct. 17: cloudy, spitting snow
Oct. 18: Heard, not seen Oct. 18: Sunny, bright

Prior weather & number of days since change: Cloudy all day Oct. 14; snowed all day Oct. 15; about 3 inches of snow on ground.

Describe habitat: Ravine with thick shrubbery, mainly willows and scrub oak.

Describe behavior: We first heard the bird, making an unfamiliar sound. He skulked and scratched in and under shrubs, hopped up into a bush, then flew to another one. He ultimately flew up onto a vertical dirt bank. As he probed into various crevices in the dirt he afforded us very good looks. While we searched for him he spent quite a lot of time hiding in the shrubbery or perhaps not even moving. On the second day I managed only a couple of brief glimpses, and we couldn't find him at all the third day except to hear the call.

Field marks observed: size, color, pattern, shape, bill, etc.: Rufous-sided Towhee type by plumage, size, and behavior.

Inky black head and hood, back, and tail. Red eye.

Wings inky black except for one small white spot close to shoulder on edge of wing next to breast; Rising (in N. Am. Sparrows) calls the white spot a "speculum"--a term I would not have thought of. Some outer primaries outlined with narrow white trim.

Rufous sides bright, contrasting vividly with inky black back and white breast/belly.

Bird's call or song: A loud, drawn-out "chee-ink" or "pree-erk," quite different in tonal quality from Spotted Towhee call. Two syllabled, or one extended syllable, rising in pitch. (I can't describe calls adequately.) Quality vaguely like the chink of a Canyon Wren (rather a far-fetched comparison), but with vibrato. Spotted Towhees make whiny calls; this one's call had more of a musical timbre. Eastern's call also louder; Spotted Towhee calls like a bird muttering to itself in the scrub or complaining because it can't find something. The Eastern calls attention to itself with a comparatively loud announcement. Especially because it's so hard to find the bird itself.

Similar species: Spotted Towhee has white spotting in wings and back and has no call that resembles the call of this bird. The contrast between rufous sides and back seemed more striking on this bird than on Spotted Towhees. This bird also seems more secretive than Spotted Towhees. It flies to a space and then doesn't move, or sneaks off unseen. Particularly on Oct. 17 I had a very hard time getting even a glimpse of the bird. The towhees is appeared this week; I looked carefully at one remaining Spotted Towhee and noticed that, on this individual, the black head contrasted somewhat with a charcoal back and (charcoal) tail; the Eastern was inky black crown to tail.

Prior experience: We see Spotted Towhees daily where we live. (Except that they essentially disappeared the same day as this bird disappeared.) We have encountered Eastern Towhees in New York and other eastern states but not frequently, (plus a couple of times at Bonny Res.). Every time we hear them we puzzle over the ID.

Description from: Notes taken orally in field and transcribed when we got home.

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