

# Documentation of Bicknell's Thrush for P.O.R.C.

by Steven Feldstein

Bicknell's Thrush (*Catharus bicknelli*), formerly a subspecies of Gray-cheeked Thrush (*C. minimus*), is now regarded as a full species (American Ornithologists' Union 1995). This split was based on the study of Ouellet (1993), who found morphological, habitat, vocal, and genetic differences between these two taxa. The breeding range of Bicknell's Thrush is restricted to eastern New York state, New England, southern Quebec, and the Maritime provinces of Canada, whereas the breeding range of Gray-cheeked Thrush extends from Newfoundland across Canada and Alaska to eastern Siberia. The winter range of these two species apparently do not overlap, as Bicknell's Thrush winters in the West Indies, and Gray-cheeked Thrush in South America. Unlike Gray-cheeked Thrush, whose migration route is known to cover much of eastern North America, the route that Bicknell's Thrush takes between its breeding and wintering grounds is poorly known. However, the limited number of records suggests that Bicknell's Thrush migrates east of the Appalachian Mountains. This indicates that Pennsylvania birders should primarily be looking for Bicknell's Thrush in the eastern part of the state. However, with records of Bicknell's Thrush from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, and West Virginia (American Ornithologists' Union 1957) it is possible for migrant Bicknell's Thrush to occur anywhere in Pennsylvania.

Several recent articles in the birding literature describe how to distinguish between Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's Thrush (Curson and Lewington 1994; McLaren 1995). Compared to Gray-cheeked Thrush, the most commonly

discussed field marks for identifying Bicknell's Thrush are 1) the pale base of the lower mandible being more extensive and brighter yellow, 2) browner upperparts, and 3) a rufous wash to the tail. However, these field marks do not hold for all individuals, as both species exhibit extensive individual variability. Furthermore, the Newfoundland subspecies of Gray-cheeked Thrush, *minimus*, is sufficiently variable (Knox 1996) such that some individuals can show some or all of the field marks noted above for Bicknell's Thrush. Thus, based only on our present knowledge of field marks, it seems impossible to identify with complete confidence any migrant Bicknell's Thrush. However, there are consistent differences in both song (Ouellet 1993) and call (Evans 1994) between the two species. Furthermore, those individuals with extreme wing chord measurements can be definitively identified [the wing chord measurements of Ouellet (1993) find a range of 81.7-98.8 mm for Bicknell's Thrush and 93.4-107.9 mm for Gray-cheeked Thrush].

Given these difficulties in identifying migrant Bicknell's Thrush, P.O.R.C. has decided to review only those records which include either 1) taped recordings of song or call, 2) thorough documentation including wing chord measurements, or 3) a specimen. Nevertheless, P.O.R.C. does strongly encourage birders to submit detailed documentation of any individuals suspected of being Bicknell's Thrush. In addition to the field marks mentioned above, it may also be worth paying close attention to size, primary projection (Lane *pers. comm.*) pattern of the breast spots, and the color of the flanks, throat, breast, legs, feet, base of the primaries,

and edges of the wings. Such records will be archived by P.O.R.C., and re-examined if reliable field marks for separating these two species are developed in the future.

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