

Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*)

Description: This reclusive bird's cinnamon brown upperparts are good camouflage as it scrabbles for leaf-litter invertebrates deep in the forest, though it pops upright frequently to peer about, revealing round black spots on a white breast. Combined with a bold eye-ringing the Wood Thrush has stronger markings than other brown thrushes. Song is a beautiful melodic tune.

The Wood Thrush is a consummate songster and it can sing “internal duets” with itself. In the final trilling phrase of its three-part song, it sings pairs of notes simultaneously, one in each branch of its y-shaped syrinx, or voicebox. The two parts harmonize with each other to produce a haunting, ventriloquial sound.

Trend: Declining - Conservation Tipping Point Yellow Alert

Habitat: Wood Thrushes breed throughout mature deciduous and mixed forests in eastern North

America, most commonly those with American beech, sweet gum, red maple, black gum, eastern hemlock, flowering dogwood, American hornbeam, oaks, or pines. Wood thrush are considered an “Area Sensitive” species, requiring large areas of unfragmented forest to be most successful. They nest somewhat less successfully in fragmented forests and even suburban parks where there are enough large trees for a territory. Ideal habitat includes trees over 50 feet tall, a moderate understory of saplings and shrubs, an open floor with moist soil and decaying leaf litter, and water nearby. Favored understory species include southern arrowwood, smooth blackhaw, spicebush, coast pepperbush, rhododendron, and blueberry.

Wood Thrushes forage by hopping through leaf litter on the forest floor, tossing leaves to expose insects or probing for litter-dwelling prey. While foraging, they frequently bob upright for a look around. The nest is usually in the lower branches of a sapling or shrub, where a fork provides good support and twigs or foliage provide shade and cover. A pair often raises two broods of youngsters per season but may need 3 or 4 attempts to do so. A second nest after a successful first is often within 300 feet, but an unsuccessful nest may provoke a wider search for a new site.

Ways You can help with Conservation: According to the [North American Breeding Bird Survey](#), this species declined by an estimated 1% per year between 1966 and 2023, resulting in a cumulative decline of 45% over that period. Major threats to this species include habitat loss and forest fragmentation; predation by cats, raccoons, snakes, and other predators; and insect (food) population declines.



Photo by Linnet Tse

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Identify and protect existing breeding habitat. Wood thrush are known for strong site fidelity which means they will return each year to the almost exact location they nested the year before.

Maintain large, unfragmented areas of healthy deciduous forest. Support local land trusts and encourage public land managers to protect and enhance existing forests. Fragmented forests with more edge habitat are more vulnerable to predators and nest parasitism.

Keep cats indoors and kindly encourage others to do so. Wood thrushes nest in the shrub layer, making them more vulnerable to predators such as raccoons, jays, crows, and domestic or feral cats.



Photo by Nancy Beach

Eliminate pesticide spraying including mosquito spraying to help insects. [Leaving your leaves in your yard](#) has multiple positive impacts for trees, insects and birds. Wood Thrushes feed mostly on leaf-litter invertebrates and fruits from shrubs. Their summer diet is predominantly invertebrates, including adult beetles and flies, caterpillars, spiders, millipedes, woodlice, and ants. Insects, snails, and salamanders found in trees are occasionally prey. Parents feed chicks soft invertebrates and pre-softened fruits.

You can help Wood Thrush by planting native shrubs and perennials, especially those that produce berries. In late summer and fall, after the breeding season, Wood Thrushes shift their diet toward fruits (particularly fatty fruits) in preparation for the demands of migration. Fruits remain important on migration and in winter, though Wood Thrushes remain omnivorous, eating a wide variety of insects as well. Fruits like spicebush, fox grape, blueberry, holly, elderberry, jack-in-the-pulpit, Virginia creeper, pokeweed, dogwood, black cherry, and black gum are important parts of the wood thrush diet.

Consider helping with [on-going breeding bird surveys](#) and joining [the Conservation Committee](#) to advocate for these and other birds. New Hope Bird Alliance has been advocating to protect nesting Wood Thrushes in Blackwood Farm Park in Orange County. NHBA members have been conducting surveys for Wood Thrush, Ovenbirds and other birds on several trails in the park. Installation of a proposed disc golf course in Alice's loop would threaten existing sites where Wood Thrush are known to breed. *Contact newhopebird@gmail.com to get involved.*