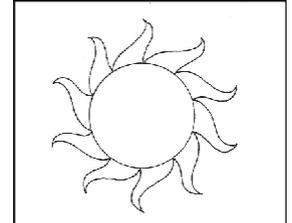
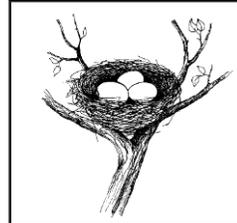
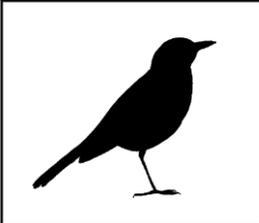




# Thrushes

Order Passeriformes  
Family Turdidae

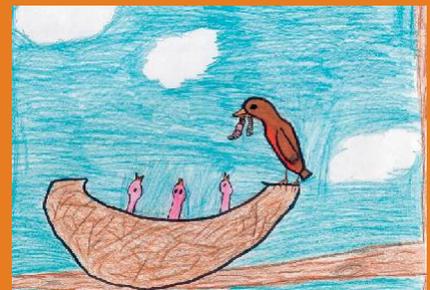


The thrush family of birds includes some of our most familiar and best-loved species. Both the American robin and the eastern bluebird are thrushes, along with the wood thrush, hermit thrush and the veery. While there is some diversity among this group, they do share certain features. All thrushes are known for their melodic, flute-like songs, their pale “robin’s-egg-blue” eggs, and nestlings which are easily recognized by their spotted breast feathers.



## American Robin

*Turdus Migratorius*



By far the most recognized bird in all of North America is the American robin. Even small children know this bird by sight, and by the male’s “cheer-iup, cheer-ily, cheer-iup” song. There are few backyards in Pennsylvania that do not host a nesting robin during spring and summer. While you may think that the first robin you see in early spring is a sign of the new season, **you may be surprised to know that many robins spend the entire winter here.** They retreat to the woods in cold weather where they have access to plenty of small, soft fruits and berries. Robins rarely come to a backyard bird feeding station because they do not have a bill that can crack open the sunflower seeds and other seeds commonly used to fill feeders. If you offer raisins and other small fruits on a tray feeder near the ground, you may entice a few. Robins also love to bathe, so a birdbath placed on the ground suits them well.

Robins are about 10 inches long with a **dark slate-gray upper body and celebrated red breast.** Males are slightly darker than females. Both have a white eye, ring and the young fledglings all have spotted breasts. **Like all thrushes, they have thin bills, perfect for grabbing insects.** Robins forage on the ground among the leaf litter and lawns for **insects, spiders, snails, and earthworms.** However, **small fruits make up the largest part of their diet.** Perhaps contrary to belief, robins find worms by sight, not sound.



The male robin sings his intricate mating song starting early in the morning to attract the attention of a mate and defend his territory. Their cup-shaped nests can be found just about anywhere. Made of twigs and cemented with mud, the interior of the nest is lined with fine grasses or animal fur. **The female forms the muddy nest with her own body** and during nest-building you may see a female robin with mud caked to her red breast feathers, indicating she has been hard at work constructing her nursery.



**Four to five pale blue eggs are incubated by the female.** Both parents help to feed the **fledglings** who **almost always spend the later stages of growth on the ground** where they are often picked up by **people who assume they have been abandoned. They have not. The parents will continue to feed them until they are on their own.** While on the ground, the fledglings are susceptible to an array of predators, most commonly pet cats.



**Robins have adapted well to human settlements,** and their numbers and range have actually increased over the years. **Male robins can become aggressive during breeding season, charging any other male robin they see, including their own reflections.** Homeowners with large, plate-glass windows have probably witnessed this as a robin repeatedly threatens his own reflection on the glass. The only real solution is to cover your window on the outside or wait for the breeding season to pass. Neither is appealing to most homeowners.



Because robins are such **early nesters,** their first nest of the season is **often built in an evergreen tree since the deciduous trees may not have leafed yet.** The evergreen tree provides more shelter for the nesting female in early spring. Because of this behavior, it is not at all unusual to find an old abandoned robin's nest deep within the branches of your Christmas tree when you begin decorating it for the holidays. Consider it a reminder of spring.

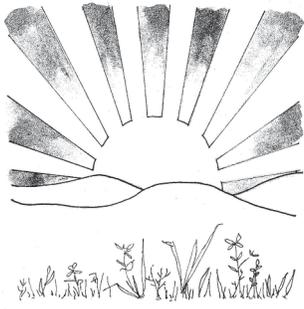


## Wood Thrush

*Hylocichla mustelina*



If you live in or near a wooded area in Pennsylvania, you have certainly heard the **flute-like song of the wood thrush at dawn and dusk** as the spring season breaks. As their name suggests, their preferred habitat is deep woodland.



Similar in size and shape to robins, **wood thrushes have a reddish head and olive back and tails. Their breast is a creamy white with distinct brown spots splashed across it.** Like all thrushes, they like to feed on insects, fruits and berries, spiders, worms and snails.

Nests are placed about 10 feet off the ground, but can be found much higher. They are similar to robin nests in size and structure, but the inner nest is often lined with rootlets, and **the wood thrush has a habit of placing something white on the outside wall of the nest.**

Up to four pale-blue eggs will hatch after about two weeks, and the chicks leave the nest about **two weeks after hatching. The fledglings depend on the adults for quite some time, and sometimes press the parents for food for almost a month after leaving the nest.**

**Wood thrushes have been on the decline for several decades** due to the loss and fragmentation of their forested habitats. Loss of habitat doesn't only happen here in our state. In their wintering grounds in Mexico and Panama, the same habitat destruction is taking place, threatening one of our most musical songbirds.



### Veery

*Catharus fuscescens*

### Hermit Thrush

*Catharus guttatus*



**Both the veery and the hermit thrush are groundnesters and ground feeders**, foraging in the leaf litter for insects and berries. The veery is named for its “*da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer*” call. Most common in the northern portion of the state where deciduous forests are damp and covered with a lot of shrubs and ferns, **veeries are reddish-brown all over their topside** with a faintly spotted cream breast.

The **hermit thrush** is similar to the veery except its **topside is brownish-red with a red tail.** Its creamy breast is faintly spotted as well. **Hermit thrushes are much more reclusive** than our other thrushes. They like to live deep within damp, cool forests, especially mixed deciduous and coniferous woodlands. Their song is a lovely “*Oh, ho-ah, purry, purry, sweetly sweetly,*” and they have the peculiar habit of standing their ground when a trespasser goes by, raising and lowering their tail and flapping their wings as if to appear larger.

Blue eggs are placed in nests of woven twigs, bark, ferns, mosses and grass. **Nests may be lined with pine needles or even porcupine hair!**

Both the **gray-cheeked thrush** (*Catharus minimus*) and the **swainson's thrush** (*Catharus ustulatus*) can be seen occasionally in Pennsylvania, but mostly in the northern regions and then only seasonally.





## Eastern Bluebird

*Sialis sialis*



Fortunately for bird lovers, the **eastern bluebird has been steadily making a comeback** after suffering for decades from a continuous loss of habitat, constant competition for nesting sites with the more aggressive starlings, and a lack of food during early spring cold-snaps.

Bluebirds are smaller than robins at just six inches in length. Often perched in small feeding flocks, a bluebird will sweep out to grasp an insect in mid-air before returning to its perch. Unlike other thrushes, **bluebirds rarely feed on the ground**. In winter they feed almost exclusively on soft fruits and berries, especially from sumac, dogwood, Virginia creeper, pokeweed, elderberry and poison ivy. **Like robins, it is not at all unusual in Pennsylvania to find a flock of bluebirds in wintertime** moving through the forests feeding on berries.

**Bluebirds have a soft musical call**, an almost flute-like “*tru-ly, tru-ly*,” along with some faint gurgling notes that can be heard as early as March. When courting, the males sing to the female, settle near her, spread his wings and tail, and even pass food to her. If she accepts his advances, they will preen each other’s feathers.

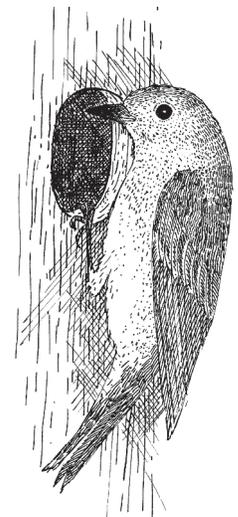


The bluebird’s plumage is a sight to behold, especially when sunlight strikes **the male’s vivid blue head and back** (at left). The female plumage is slightly less striking (at right), but both sport a **russet breast**, and the **fledglings have the familiar spotted breast of all young thrushes**.



**Unlike the other thrushes, bluebirds will only nest in a cavity**. That cavity needs to be in open habitats such as orchards, pastures, hayfields, fence lines, forest clearings or suburban gardens and parks. **Bluebirds have benefited greatly from man-made nesting boxes** when placed in just the right habitat.

**The nest is created from fine grasses piled at the bottom of the hollow**. By late March, the first clutch of up to six pale blue eggs will be laid. After the young have fledged, the pair will return to the same cavity to lay a new clutch of eggs. **When on their nest, bluebirds cannot see predators approaching**. To avoid drawing predators to the odor of the nestling’s waste, bluebirds, like all cavity nesters, **remove the fecal sacs of the fledglings** on a regular basis and drop them far away from the cavity.





## A Simple Review of Thrushes



It seems like there could be a better, more musical, name for **birds belonging to the thrush family**. After all, they **include birds with the most melodic songs**. American robins, wood thrushes and eastern bluebirds are all thrushes. In addition to lovely songs, **many birds in this family have red breasts**, and all the **nestlings** in the thrush family have **spotted breast feathers**. The **eggs** of thrushes are all **pale blue**.

The **robin's "cheerily cheer-up cheerio"** can be heard from almost every backyard in the spring. Along with the mallard duck, it might be the first bird every child learns by sight and sound. Both male and female have a red breast and dark head and body. These birds are so loved there is even a Crayola crayon named "robin's egg blue."

In winter our **robins spend most of the cold weather in the woods**, where there is an abundance of fruits and berries.



As the weather warms and insects and worms become more active, robins from southern states move back into our state and nest.



**Eastern bluebirds** are also here all winter and find food in the same places as robins. While robins spend a good bit of time on the ground searching for food, bluebirds prefer to perch on fenceposts and wires, where they wait for an insect to pass by. They then **flit off their perch to snatch the bug**. Bluebird numbers have declined because they compete for **cavity nesting** sites with the more aggressive starling and house sparrow. Fortunately for bluebirds, many people put bluebird boxes on their property to help them.

One of the thrushes that will keep its spotted breast to adulthood is the **wood thrush**. Slightly smaller than a robin, **wood thrushes live in the woods** and sing their lovely **flute-like song** on early summer evenings. Living in the low brush, wood thrushes thrash through the fallen leaves on the forest floor searching for insects.

**Hermit thrushes and veeries** are also thrushes. Both **look similar to wood thrushes**.