The Year of the Varied Thrush Invasions

Rich Stallcup

W

e slip lightly between ferns under the permanent shadow of an ancient grove of redwood and Douglas fir. Not only can we hear the quiet energy of the trees themselves, but we can hear birds—lots of them. The sounds are eerie hum-whistles, and while there are many voices, it is not easy to tell from which direction any one is cast.

Since banana slugs and rough-skinned newts are practically mute, and the sharp “tic-ticks” from Winter Wrens are absorbed by the woods (like the birds themselves), most winter mornings are pretty quiet here. But on this Christmas Day of 1994, there’s a “wheer,” “phurr,” “chup,” or “weeew-cerrr” almost everywhere. It’s an “invasion year” for Varied Thrushes, and we’ve just stepped into a bivouac—a communal roost.

Some birds flit from shallow foraging holes in the deep, damp needle-litter to low branches of huge trees, while others seem simply to flit through cracks in the darkness and disappear. This place where they are wintering in the Coast Ranges of central California is very much like the one where they fledged, from northwest California well into Alaska: it is old-growth—same forest, different trees.

Invasion Years

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vassions are irregular movements of large numbers of birds, ones that nest at northerly latitudes, to southerly latitudes in fall and winter. In most years there are few or no individuals of these birds south of their normal range; then suddenly one winter there are many. In some cases an invasion involves only one species (e.g., Varied Thrush, Rough-legged Hawk, Bohemian Waxwing, or Mountain Bluebird). In other cases there will be a whole set of invading species: finches (Pine Siskins, Crossbills, Purple Finches, Evening Grosbeaks, etcetera); or montane species (Brown Creepers, Band-tailed Pigeons, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and nuthatches).

Except for crossbills and pigeons, which are also nomadic and follow cone/nut crops, the probable cause for most invasions is the combination of a very successful nesting season followed by a crash in locally available food. The classic example is that of the Snowy Owl:

A male Snowy Owl arrives (or remains) on his breeding territory some days before a potential mate arrives. He hunts and brings what he catches to a special mound, cleared of tundra vegetation. When the female arrives and finds the corpses of ten lemmings and 15 voles scattered around, she knows it will be easy to raise offspring here, and the pair may fledge eight or ten owlets. (If, upon arrival, she finds the back half of a vole and a long spur’s wing, she tucks her tail and moves on.)

When the microtine (vole and lemming) cycle peaks and owls all across the Arctic have many young, then it crashes in the same season, there is not enough food for all the owls. Subordinate birds (usually the young) are driven off to the south in search of better forage. They then may reach as far as central California.

For Snowy Owls, invasions to California appear to happen about once in 50 years. For other invasionary species, like Varied Thrush and Red-breasted Nuthatch, the incidence is more like once in five years. Reasons for other species invading the south are similar to those for Snowy Owls but always more complicated. For Varied Thrushes, it may be a low summer production of berries on the breeding range or their unexplainable sensing that a hard winter is coming. It is true that fall Varied Thrush invasions to California are followed here by record-making rains in winter.

Casualties

The central Coast Ranges of California support some kind of avian invasion almost every winter. This time it is Varied Thrushes. Next winter it may be the Red-breasted Nuthatches’ turn; they now are rare. Except for occasional “echo flights,” in which a small invasion follows a large one, gaps at least a few years separate flights by any one species. Much of the reason for this may be a need to rebuild numbers within the breeding population, for invasions always involve many casualties.

During the period of a Varied Thrush incursion, tens of thousands of these birds will die as road kills (it is their nature to fly to “forest clearings” at dawn and dusk) and a similar number to house cats (the thrushes are furtive ground feeders). Where the birds may be abundant in November, the high mortality may make numbers seem normal or low by March. Other invading species face other dangers that produce the same result.

The Varied Thrush

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aried Thrushes are really beautiful and quite unique. Their scientific name (Ixoreus naevius) means “mountain mistletoe-berry eater,” which is nice but kinda long. They’re not variable, so “Varied” doesn’t seem to be the right name, and since they are not true robins, their primary colloquial name, “Oregon Robin,” is also incorrect. Maybe Oregon Thrush. Or may better we should just leave it alone.

Varied Thrush visits a porcupine feeder.
The central Coast Ranges of California support some kind of avian invasion almost every winter.

High fliers (top to bottom): American Robin, Varied Thrush, Townsend's Solitaire.

like” to the sky. While closely related, Robins and Varied Thrushes in fact are very different birds.

In flight, Varied Thrushes have a short-tailed look (even when compared to Robins), and all of them show a pale, orange wingstripe. Since Townsend’s Solitaire (the only other highly flying species that shows an orange wingstripe) is long-tailed, Varied Thrushes may be confidently identified in flight at long distance.

The Varied Thrush is a typical “western bird” but is highly prone to vagrancy and has been recorded in most of eastern Canada and in at least 40 of the lower 48 states. There have been many records in the eastern U.S. this winter, and it seems likely that most extralimital records happen during invasion years.

Next Christmas in that ancient grove of redwood and Douglas fir, there may be no “whee” or “phurr” to accompany the holy aura of giant trees and muted “tick-tick” of Winter Wren; but a chorus of “yank-yank” and “yank-yank-yank” from Red-Breasted Nuthatches in the upper branches or thousands of “chup-chups” and “chup-chup-chups” from Red Crossbills above the canopy can fill a lot of forest sound space.

In the Encyclopedia of North American Birds, John K. Terres describes the Varied Thrush as “...in actions, form, similar to [American] robin,...” Yet most of their behaviors are very different, except for ground-feeding habits and sometimes sharing communal roosts. While robins often perch and feed in the open, Varied Thrushes rarely do. Scared Robins fly away, but usually scared Varied Thrushes will “freeze” on the ground or in low trees with their heads tilted back and bills pointed “bittern-

Flyway Choreography
from page 3
brackish marshes fringed the mudflats; salt evaporator ponds dotted the edge with pools of color.

The extent of tidal flats and inaccessibility of much of the shore and wetlands in this enormous estuary had discouraged past attempts to document the total numbers of shorebirds San Francisco Bay supports. PRBO’s Pacific Flyway Project had set out to do just this.

Anyone who has ever attempted to count birds realizes that conducting a shoreline census is not easy. Birds launch into flight at inopportune moments; raptors cruise overhead; and the mudflat explodes with huge flocks of shorebirds taking wing. We minimized this problem by carefully briefing each census team, fine-tuning the timing of counts in adjacent areas, and completing our counts in the shortest possible time.

Organizing a census of this magnitude was akin to choreographing a dance. On opening day, after months of rehearsal, dawn broke silently on the stage — all of San Francisco Bay. Census teams gathered on roadsides around maps and thermoses of hot coffee. From my count area, I could see one census team 500 yards up the shoreline and another setting up scopes across the slough. Dozens of volunteer censurers (the stars of this show) were responding in that moment to similar cues for miles around the bayshore stage.

Janet Kjelmyr, a staff biologist in PRBO’s Coastal Program, has concentrated for five years on the Pacific Flyway Project.

In our last issue, this drawing by Keith Hansen was incorrectly labeled. Both comparisons show an Arctic Loon on the left and a Pacific Loon on the right. Also, the larger drawing by Keith of head profiles depicted five loons (not just mid-sized ones) as they appear well into their first winter.