

Community Life

Spotted on the Hill

The Eastern Towhee

ARTICLE AND PHOTO BY PETER VANKEVICH



The Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) is a strikingly handsome bird that, good looks notwithstanding, is perhaps more noted for its vocalizations. The male has a black head, neck and shoulders, a white chest and rust-red wings and sides. The female has the same color pattern as the male, but is dark brown where the male is black colored. When one thinks of a sparrow, many envision dull-colored birds with subtle streaking, spots and eye lines that make species identification sometimes challenging. Many will be surprised to learn that this towhee is also a member of the sparrow family.

In most of its distribution area including here, the eye color of these birds is red, but if you find yourself birding in Florida or the southeastern coastal regions beginning on the lower Outer Banks of North Carolina, you may see a form of this bird whose eye color is white or straw colored.

Towhees are birds that prefer undergrowth and you may know of their presence by hearing loud rummaging sounds as they kick leaves in search of seeds, beetles, grubs and worms. Although ground feeders, in the spring and early summer they will often

perch on top of a shrub or small tree and sing out loudly. Towhees although present year round, are in small numbers from late fall to early spring. They are most prominent on the Hill in April and early May when they pass through in migration and you may be pleasantly surprised to see one in your back yard in the morning resting from a long night's journey into day.

The hazards of migration are many. Because they are ground birds, they are susceptible to predators such as cats. Perhaps a sign of the times or a bad signal, but I found a study of arrival times on wintering grounds in Florida that was based on specimen records from birds killed by striking a television tower in northern Florida.

Picking up an older Eastern region birds field guide published before the mid 1990s you won't find the Eastern Towhee; rather it will be called the Rufous-sided Towhee. The official arbiter of bird nomenclature, The American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), determined that this bird and its counterpart in the west, the Spotted Towhee formerly lumped together as subspecies were split and each received full species status.

This bird was named towhee in 1731 by a British born naturalist/artist named Mark Catesby who published in two volumes (1731 and 1743) a monumental work called the Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Islands of the Bahamas. Consisting of 220 portfolio sized plates of birds, in-

sects, fish, reptiles and amphibians, and mammals, it was the first published account of flora and fauna in America and produced 100 years before James John Audubon's release of *Birds of America*. Interestingly, Catesby paired the towhee with a cowbird against a balsam poplar tree.

So why are they famous for their sounds? This bird gets its name from one of its calls which does indeed sound like "towhee." It also makes a variant call described as "cherwink." But it is its song that I find so impressive, which sounds to me almost exactly as "Drink your teeeeee." Hearing it for the first time, made me think, "Wow, the bird knows English!"

Rumor has it that a well-known playwright who has recently become a fanatical birder is working on a screenplay about one of our featured birds, which after an unusual cold snap, takes up with a fast-flying, high-living flock of Cedar Waxwings that had settled in on a tree in its territory to imbibe on fermented hawthorn berries. The bird's natural red eyes hide the signs of many hangovers and possible addiction as it struggles to make it to spring when grub worms become plentiful again. Due for production in 2011, this opus has been tentatively titled "Tea for the Towhee." OK, just kidding, but maybe I'll do it myself.

This photo was taken on an early Sunday morning in Bartholdi Park of the Botanic Gardens late April, and this bird was no doubt in migration heading north.

If you have any comments or know of any interesting birds on Capitol Hill that could be a possible feature for this column, or would like to join me for a stroll on the Hill with your binoculars or camera on a weekend morning, feel free to contact me, petevankevich@gmail.com. ★