

## Hermit Thrush: The Best Singer of All

It seems I have searched through mounds of ornithological literature in seeking a description of the song of the Hermit Thrush that comes close to representing the ethereal music of that spot-breasted bird. I had about decided a word picture did not exist when I ran across a passage in John K. Terres' *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. I quote: the song "... opens with clear flutelike note, followed by ethereal bell-like tones, ascending and descending in no fixed order, rising until reaching dizzying vocal heights and notes fade away in a silvery tinkle."

That's the song I heard one July afternoon as the shadows grew long in a spruce forest in northern Vermont. I was sitting on a stump — tired, hot and discouraged — after hauling myself up a 25-foot rock cliff, pulling a heavy lens, tripod and camera with me. My goal was to position myself at eye level with the nest of a hummingbird saddled on a small limb of a sugar maple that had its roots in the ground below the cliff. The nest was an exquisite example of bird architecture; green-gray lichens were intricately attached to each other and to the limb with spider webbing.

I focused on the nest — 15 feet away — and waited for the female to return to her two pea-sized eggs. No doubt she was off someplace poking her long bill into a delicate wildflower in search of nectar. Surely, I thought, she would return before the sun disappeared behind the trees, making it too dark for picture taking. Besides, a chill was descending on the woods of the Northeast Kingdom. If the female was staying away in response to my presence, the eggs would be chilled and I would be responsible.

Then I heard the song of the Hermit Thrush: unhurried, serene and intricate. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. I was not sure when it ended and faded into silence, but realized I had been holding my breath.

Just then, I heard the buzz of the hummingbird's wings. I reached for the cable release and peered into the viewfinder just in

time to see the little bird drop onto her nest like a silent helicopter landing. Once settled on her eggs in the deep cup of the nest, the female's bill poked almost straight up as did her tail. It was a wondrous sight, and I made picture after picture of her. She seemed oblivious to me, to the camera, and to the click of the shutter.



JOHN TROTT PHOTO

**The soft brown of the Hermit Thrush's head and back, distinctly spotted breast, and russet tail create a picture of elegant perfection.**

The complicated climb back down the cliff face was made with no difficulty. I was experiencing an exhilaration of spirit induced by the New England woods, the success of photographing the hummingbird, and, most of all, by the other-worldly song of the Hermit Thrush.

The Hermit Thrush rarely sings in winter, yet this shy and secretive bird can occasionally be seen in deep woods, perched quiet and still. The only movement will be from its reddish tail, which the bird constantly flips up, then slowly lowers.

Hermit Thrushes feed on winter berries of all kinds: holly privet, honeysuckle, poison ivy, viburnum and pokeberries. In winter, when they are among us, the birds are silent except for an occasional "chuck."

It was after observing a Hermit Thrush feeding on pokeberries one day in October that I had a memorable experience. At the time I was Resident Naturalist at the Madeira School near McLean, Virginia, documenting the plant and animal life on this 400-acre

tract, which borders the Potomac River. I was thinking that, since the Hermit Thrush liked pokeberries in October, it might especially welcome them in January. Consequently, I picked and froze in plastic bags a number of clusters of the purple berries.

One very cold day in January, when snow covered the ground, I placed a cluster of the frozen berries on the large platform feeder outside the nature center. Then I went about my business of teaching an ornithology class.

When I returned after an hour or so, I saw a Hermit Thrush on the feeder, calmly eating the pokeberries. Up to that point, I had not been aware that the thrush was spending the winter in the Madeira woods. The bird was deliberate and unhurried in its movements. I moved to the window to observe the handsome bird that had altered my attitude in the northwoods with his serenely complex song.

I saw the big thrush eye that enables the bird to see in the dim light of the forest floor that it inhabits. I also saw the long, delicate pink legs used for running over the leaf litter of the forest. The soft brown of the bird's head and back, distinctly spotted breast, and russet tail completed a picture of elegant perfection.

After the bird had consumed all of the pea-sized berries, it flew to the woods. I kept the feeder supplied with pokeberries every day after that, until I had exhausted my supply. How I wished I had frozen more! Each day, as long as the berries lasted, the bird returned.

I keep hoping that, as winter ends and the spot-breasted thrush feels the urge to migrate north to nest, he will respond to some inner need to rehearse his serene song as a sort of practice session before flying north to a cool New England forest. There he will declare himself to a mate and lay claim to an acre of woodland.

Until that happens, I will carefully snip off clusters of pokeberries in October and fill the freezer with them. Maybe in winter I can lure the best singer of them all to my feeder. ■