

# Everything is a hermit thrush, unless it isn't

Birding is a three-dimensional pastime. It's superior to, say, mushrooming, where the quarry is never higher than your shoelaces. And, of course, misidentifying a bird won't kill you. Now, while all the mushroomers get busy writing angry op-eds, let me explain.

Birds fly. The sky's the limit. One can't go birding without looking up. The entire forest is stratified, from the treetop warblers to the ground foraging turkeys. And in the middle: thrushes.

Members of the thrush family spend much of their time on or near the ground. They forage on foot.

Males on territory might sing from a treetop, but they are often content to croon from a lower branch in the canopy. Birders sometimes complain about "warbler neck," the pain that comes from looking high into the trees. Nobody complains about thrush neck.

Robins and bluebirds are thrushes. They're easy to tell apart. The rest? Not so much. All the medium-sized thrushes are various shades of brown, with whitish, spotted breasts. So when walking in the woods, identification becomes easier if you start with a default bird: everything is a hermit thrush,

unless it isn't.

The hermit thrush is the most common and widespread thrush in Maine. It is comfortable in the understory of both hardwood and softwood trees. It forages through the leaf litter on the ground. When surprised, it may fly to a nearby branch where it can look you over and assess the threat, perhaps raising its tail or wiggling its wings. In other words, it's easy. Its reddish tail contrasts with its brown body, confirming the identification at a glance. The whitish breast is lightly spotted.

Hermit thrushes don't go far in winter. Most stay in the states. Some are even found on Christmas bird counts in Maine. They are the earliest of the brown thrushes to return, and start singing in late April.

Like their cousins, the song is an ethereal, flute-like melody, rising and falling. The Swainson's thrush is more secretive and prefers cool, damp, coniferous understories. In Maine's northern, coastal and alpine forests, it is just as common as hermits. While hermit thrushes nest on or near the ground, Swainson's thrushes are tree nesters. Otherwise, they forage on the ground like other thrushes. This time of year, they habitually pop out of the woods onto logging roads where it can be a little easier for them to spot food.

Swainson's thrushes winter in Central and South America, returning to



BOB DUCHESNE

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Maine later in May. The flute-like song is similar to the hermit thrush's, but it is raspier and always rises in pitch. They are slightly darker than hermits, with a tail the same color as the rest of the bird. A buffy eye-ring gives the bird a spooky face.

The veery is the same size as the first two, though it's a

cinnamon color with a barely spotted chest. In fact, the apparent lack of spots is a helpful field mark when compared to other thrushes. It prefers a thick, deciduous understory, preferably on the edge of wetlands, making it one of the hardest thrushes to see. Fortunately, it is very vocal. The downward organ notes of its

song are distinctive, but its "view" call notes are heard more often. Veeries tend to nest in clusters. When one is present, expect several.

Veeries winter in Brazil, and they don't return to Maine until about the third week of May.

The wood thrush is a denizen of deciduous forests. Although I've encountered

breeding birds on the Golden Road above Moosehead Lake and in Aroostook State Park, their northern range limit seems to be in central Maine. Wood thrushes are bright brown with a heavily spotted breast, making them easy to identify. Their "ee-oh-lay-teeeee" song is distinctive.

Wood thrushes are enigmatic in several other ways. They are declining rapidly. Habitat loss is the usual culprit. They prefer mature trees and a thick understory, which is missing from most of Maine's working forest, but is common in places like the Kennebec Highlands. They are highly vulnerable to cowbird nest parasitism. Furthermore, across their mid-Atlantic breeding range, an overpopulation of deer is devouring the understory of some forests, including actual nests. Fortunately, the birds have softened the blow by raising multiple broods per year. The male often takes over raising the first brood while the female starts another.

Now that we've reached midsummer, the canopy birds are getting quieter and harder to see. Thank you, thrushes, for coming down to my level.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at [mainebirding-trail.com](http://mainebirding-trail.com). He can be reached at [duchesne@midmaine.com](mailto:duchesne@midmaine.com).



THOMAS MARK SZELOG

"Bull Moose on Wass Stream" is one of several photographs included in "Imagine the Maine Woods National Park," a fine art photography exhibit.

## Exhibit

Continued from Page C1

"We're trying to use our photographs and our words to really stir people's ecological conscience."

The proposed 3.2-million-acre park, which would engulf the woods of the Moosehead-Katahdin region, was and still is an ambitious and extremely contentious idea, but it has been a nonstarter. None of Maine's congressional delegates have ever tried to introduce a bill that would create the park. Only Congress is empowered to create national parks.

It is not to be confused with the more recent proposal by Roxanne Quimby and Elliotsville Plantation Inc. to turn the 87,500-acre Katahdin Woods & Waters Recreation Area east of Baxter State Park into a national monument or national park.

"It's easy to create photographs and publish them and display them and hope you're educating people about what you think," Thomas Mark Szelog said. "From my experience, you have to go beyond that. We have an opinion, and we want people to know it."

For the past 13 years, the Szelogs have lived in a log cabin on 70 acres in Whitefield, and before that, they lived for 14 years at Marshall Point Lighthouse, perched on a rocky point near the fishing village of Port Clyde. Both homes offered them fodder to write and photograph two multi-award-winning books, "Our Point of View: Fourteen Years at a Maine Lighthouse" and "By a Maine River: A Year of Looking Closely."

After completing those two projects about 10 years ago, they started looking for another. They considered documenting nature in a number of places, including Baxter State Park and Acadia National Park, but those projects didn't quite resonate with them.

"It finally clicked,"



THOMAS MARK SZELOG

Husband and wife photography team Thomas Mark Szelog (left) and Lee Anne Szelog.

Thomas Mark Szelog said. "Acadia, Baxter — all of those places had one thing in common. They were already preserved."

Soon after, the Szelogs founded the Maine Woods National Park Photo-Documentation Project in support of land that is not conserved, but that they believe should be. The project is an independent endeavor, endorsing the mission of RESTORE: The North Woods.

Of the pair, Thomas Mark Szelog is the lead photographer, though Lee Ann Szelog often accompanies him in the field, and five years ago, she started carrying her own camera.

"What we bring to the table is our love for wildlife and animals in general," Lee Ann Szelog said. "And because we spend so much time in the forest, we realize the need to take care of this wildlife and their habitats."

"The moose, the Canada lynx, they need huge, expansive areas to thrive," she said. "If we don't protect these animals, they could go extinct in Maine, just like the wolves and the caribou did less than 100 years ago."

During their multi-day expeditions into the woods, the Szelogs often spend nights sleeping in the front cramped seats of their truck. To make things more comfortable, they roll down the windows and keep out the black flies and mosquitoes with homemade truck window screens that attach by magnets.

To navigate, they use



THOMAS MARK SZELOG

"Debsconeag Deadwater" is one of several photographs included in "Imagine the Maine Woods National Park," a fine art photography exhibit by the photography team of Thomas Mark Szelog and Lee Ann Szelog. The exhibit runs through July 31 at the Belfast Free Library at 106 High St. in Belfast.

paper maps and a compass, as well as a GPS device. And for safety, they carry a personal emergency beacon that works by satellite, since cellphone reception is usually nonexistent.

Greatly concerned about photographing wildlife in an ethical way, the Szelogs don't bait, lure or chase wildlife. They simply scout the land for specific habitats, find good places to set up a ground blind, then sit for hours on end, waiting for the animals to show up — or in some cases, not show up.

"It took me three years to get an acceptable photograph of a black bear," Thomas Mark Szelog said.

That black bear is one of several wild animals featured in the exhibit "Imagine the Maine Woods National Park." Others include the common raven, spruce grouse, American bittern and bull moose. And in addition to wildlife, the exhibit includes scenes of the mountains and remote lakes, streams and ponds of the North Woods.

Though the Belfast Free Library gallery is too small to fit all 22 photographs included in the exhibit, the gallery has a highly visible location at the front entrance of the library, ensuring many people will have the opportunity to enjoy the fine art photographs, which were all taken on film and have not been altered on computer

programs such as PhotoShop.

Accompanying the photographs are displays of statements from notable environmental conservationists in support of the creation of the proposed park, including former President Jimmy Carter, Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune, for-

mer Executive Director of the Wilderness Society Stewart Brandborg and famous environmentalist David Suzuki.

The Szelogs are looking for more venues for the traveling fine art photo exhibit, and they're also working on publishing a book of the photos, though they antici-

pate the book will take several additional years to complete.

To learn more about the Maine Woods National Park Photo-Documentation Project, visit [mainewoodsnationalpark.com](http://mainewoodsnationalpark.com), call the Szelogs at 549-5151 or email [info@MaineWoodsNationalPark.com](mailto:info@MaineWoodsNationalPark.com).



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