

Winter Bird Invasions!

By Martin Hagne

This is shaping up to be a very good year for seeing wintering birds from the north. We are seeing American Robins, American Goldfinches, and Pine Siskins in much larger numbers than most winters. We are also seeing more than usual western bird species. It's been quite busy for those birders that "chase" all of the rarities and we are wondering what will show up next.



It all started with a "mega rarity" for the upper Texas coast when a Varied Thrush showed up at Surfside, Texas (Brazoria county) back in October of this year. The Varied Thrush is a species that normally hangs out in Washington, Oregon, and California states, up to Alaska, a far cry from the Texas coast. It's a stunning bird and birders swarmed Surfside for a look as it stayed around for weeks. Other western bird species followed in the area, such as Western Wood-Pewees, and I predict more are on the way.

Recently there has been a hummingbird invasion from the west, with many Rufous hummers, the rarer (for our area) Anna's, Calliope, and others. There were four separate Anna's Hummingbirds at the small Quintana Neotropic Bird Sanctuary last week, and some are still there. So far the main speculated reason for all of these western birds showing up here is the many major fires in the western states. Their habitat and food supplies might be affected in the west and they ventured out to find better foraging grounds.

Then the northern species started to drop in. These are what we call irruptive species. They live up north and usually migrate short distances at the most, but occasionally move far south in very large numbers. The reason for these unique migrations is not straightforward, and researchers have found that the causes vary with the species. In general it is also food related, as their food supply in far northern states and Canada are low. It can also be weather related in very cold, severe or dry years when food is covered up, frozen, or nonexistent.

These irruptive species include American Robins, American Goldfinches, Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creepers, and others. Some years they are here and others not at all, or in very small numbers. They may not always irrupt (venture) south, as they might wander east or west as well. Many sparrow and duck species are somewhat irruptive. They may always migrate south, but may not go as far south if food is found along the way. I bet this will be a good year for wintering sparrows in our area as well. Of course when I say a "good year" ... its good for birders to see northern and western birds... but maybe not so good for the birds!

I hope you get to enjoy some of these less frequent visitors this winter! And keep your hummingbird feeders up all year... you never know what you might see in the winter!

Photo by Denise Stephens- Caption: A very "lost" Varied Thrush showed up in a Surfside yard this fall!