

June 2008: Meditations on Thrushes

I've always thought that the opening of T. S. Eliot's poem "Marina" most perfectly conveys the essence of the Maine coast in early summer:

"What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands

What water lapping the bow

And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog..."

I would argue, also, that if the wood thrush were removed, that scene would diminish to generic blandness, just as the removal of the grouse irrevocably alters the forest described by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*:

"Everybody knows, for example, that the autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a ruffed grouse. In terms of conventional physics, the grouse represents only a millionth of either the mass or the energy of an acre. Yet subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead."

Several thrush species--including the wood thrush and the hermit thrush, one of our most eloquent and haunting songsters--inhabit the Camden Hills and our forested coast. As we walk the local paths, we aren't always conscious of the fluting thrush music around us. However, I think many of us would notice its absence. The lack of that ethereal flow of notes--magical breath of the woods--would leave the woods distinctly quiet, empty.

Each spring, I am very aware when the first robins (also thrushes) return to my neighborhood. Suddenly that last hour or so before dusk is filled with a chorus of rollicking chirrups and clucks, our own private vespers. The ebullience of the robin's song brims over with the joy of the awakening season, lifting my spirits despite temperatures in the 30s and lingering patches of dingy snow.

Once while kayaking in Rockland Harbor in late June I thrilled to hear the upward spiraling notes of a Swainson's thrush from the shorefront, resounding clearly and distinctly across the spanse of water. It was as if the spirit of the rocky coast were reaching out to me, making sure I didn't paddle too far out to sea.

The wood thrush of Eliot's poem prefers deep, mature forests, places where it is seldom seen amid the dark depths from which its disembodied, haunting song emanates: a lyrical "ee-o-lay." Once one of the most common bird species in the eastern forest, the wood thrush has declined 43% since 1966 and is on the 2007 Audubon Watchlist as a species that is "declining or rare" and "of national

conservation concern." Researchers attribute much of its population decline to habitat fragmentation, which disrupts the deep woods habitat it prefers. Opening up the forests also enables parasitism from the brown-headed cowbird, which lays its eggs in other birds' nests to the detriment of the other birds' young. On my June bird surveys at Beech Hill Preserve, listening for birds which would by then would be nesting there, I have only heard a wood thrush once.

The loss of the wood thrush is not simply a loss for science or biodiversity--it is the loss of something essential to our experience of and connection to the woods that surround us. From Thomas Nuttall's *A Popular Handbook of the Ornithology of Eastern North America* (1896), comes this beautiful description of the wood thrush's song: "In dark and gloomy weather, when other birds are sheltered and silent, the clear notes of the Wood Thrush are heard through the dropping woods from dawn to dusk, so that the sadder the day, the sweeter and more constant is his song." What could be more meaningful in these complicated times to hear around us such angelic, such uplifting music? (Nuttall goes on to describe the song of the hermit thrush in even more enthusiastic terms, declaring that it "greatly exceeds the Wood Thrush in the melody and sweetness of its lay.") We need to continue to hear nature's song amid the chaos of our unnatural modern lives.

With Leopold's quotation in mind, I think about what others might consider to be the keystone creature that truly enliven the coastal Maine landscape for them. For me, the liquid voice of thrushes infuses the Maine woods with an intangible, almost mystical, life force. For you, it might be the white-tailed deer silently poised at the edge of a field at dusk, or the black bear on Ducktrap Mountain that emerges to raid the bird feeder and then miraculously melts away into the dark forest. Or the piercing, poignant cries of the osprey circling above its nest atop an old snag near Rockport Harbor. Or the brook trout in Megunticook River holding still in the shadow of a cutbank.

My passion for the Maine landscape and the animals that give it life--the thrush, deer, trout--is what holds me here in my hometown. It fuels my work with Coastal Mountains Land Trust, which, thanks to the support of those who feel as I do about the unique natural beauty of this area, has conserved almost 6,600 acres. The Land Trust's goal to link puzzle pieces of protected land to create large blocks of wildlife habitat--blocks of forests and fields, streams and shorefront--makes it possible for the dynamic spirits of the land around us to remain. Our land is still alive, even though we are only counting wood thrushes in ones and twos.

And fortunately, not all of us are too jaded, too removed from wilderness, to feel that life force. Head out early on a wooded trail in June, when the rising sun is burning off the last remnants of morning mist and fresh, broad leaves of maple and oak brush your arms with dew as you pass. Walk for awhile, then stop. And listen.

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