

# Varied Thrush: Making a bold statement

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

**G**lobally, the thrush family contains 169 viable species; three other thrush species are now extinct.

Eight of the 169 species are commonly seen in north central Washington (American Robin, Hermit Thrush, Mountain Bluebird, Western Bluebird, Swainson's Thrush, Townsend's Solitaire, Veery, and this month's featured bird, the Varied Thrush).



*Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.*

Thrushes are medium-sized birds that typically inhabit densely wooded areas.

The American Robin may be the most recognized thrush in our area but the Varied Thrush makes a bold statement when seen.

The rust-colored belly and throat of the Varied Thrush are eye-catching. The male has a slaty gray back, a black breast-band, and a black mask across the eye. The female shows a lighter, grayish band and eye stripe.

Wings of the Varied Thrush are strongly patterned with rust-colored bars on a black background. The flanks of these birds show a fairly strong, dappled pattern.

Varied Thrush feed on insects during the summer and then switch to berries and seeds during the winter months. When ground-feeding, the birds will



The Varied Thrush is a medium-sized bird that often inhabits densely wooded areas.

frequently grab a leaf and move it aside to discover what bugs were hiding underneath.

Known as altitudinal migrants, they prefer higher elevation, dense forested areas but, on occasion, descend to lower elevations during the winter. The year 2019 saw an abundance of Varied Thrush along the Columbia River in north central Washington. People were fortunate to have frequent observations of this normally elusive bird during this irruption.

The photo that accompanies this article was taken near the Apple Capital Loop trail in Wenatchee in February 2019.

Mountain ash berries always entice a wide variety of berry-eating birds. I was fortunate to be able to set my tripod up near two trees full of berries. I stood there for over an hour, the afternoon sun on my back, as I watched and photographed Varied Thrush, White-crowned Sparrows, American Robins,

.....  
**Known as altitudinal migrants, they prefer higher elevation, dense forested areas but, on occasion, descend to lower elevations during the winter.**

Northern Flicker and Cedar Waxwings as they arrived to get their share.

I just stood there taking photos and chatting with people passing by on the trail. I consider this type of experience to be "good work" and appreciate these opportunities when I get them.

The Varied Thrush likes dense, cool, wet areas to breed and their breeding range covers

Alaska and tapers as it extends into northern California.

They nest in mature forest areas and build their nests about 10 feet above ground. They are still fairly common but their population has declined 76 percent between 1966-2014 ([www.allaboutbirds.com](http://www.allaboutbirds.com)). The Varied Thrush population is considered to be "common but in steep decline."

Habitat fragmentation and loss are among the primary causes of the decline.

The lesson I learned from this disappointing status is that we should not miss opportunities to see and enjoy these beautiful birds.

If you can, plant some berry-producing native plants to support a mix of local bird species.

Grab your binoculars and camera and go for a walk or hike. Watch for these richly colored birds along your path. Good luck.