VARIED THRUSH

By Gail Cleveland

Think thick, damp, mossy coniferous forest. I think Avalanche Campground and the Cedars Nature Trail. Think a more isolated patch of old growth with an understory of alders, ferns and Devil's Club. I think a Middle Fork adventure hike. Now within that dank solitude, listen. I hear a series of single drawn out notes on different pitches much like a British police whistle; some say fuzzy, metallic notes in minor chords. However you describe it, it is the unmistakable song of *Ixoreus naevius*, the Varied Thrush.

One of my memorable Varied Thrush experiences took place at Glacier Wilderness Ranch in late February or early March with several feet of snow on the ground. Suddenly, that unmistakable series of discordant notes. Where did he come from? Has he been here all winter? Would he be singing if he weren't thinking about breeding? Our local bird guru Dan Casey has told us to be on the lookout for Varied Thrushes on the Christmas Bird Counts. Possibly, a few of our breeding population may come to the lower elevations, deciding to stay if feed is available, or a northern migrant may consider this a balmy food-laden winter habitat. But because the Varied Thrush is one of our earliest migrants, my bird was probably an early arrival testing out his territorial vocals.

While breeding and raising their chicks, Varied Thrushes feed on insects and invertebrates, coming down from the tops of trees where they sing, foraging on the ground much like the American Robin. In the winter they switch to fruit, berries and nuts, so they can be attracted to bird feeders in their winter range and will flock together occasionally.

In conifers during the spring, the female builds a cuplike nest near the trunk of the tree, where she lays three to four pale blue eggs flecked with brown. Much like their relatives, the American Robin, both parents feed the young and will raise two broods if the weather permits.

From those not acquainted with this beautiful bird, one often hears in the early spring, "I had the weirdest Robin in my garden." Similar in size and shape to the American Robin but slighter in build, the Varied Thrush is a much more boldly patterned bird. In the male, the rust-colored belly and throat are interrupted by a black breast-band; the female has a lighter, grayish band. A similar band lines the face at the eye. A rust-colored stripe lines the head above the eye-band, and the crown is bluish gray, as are the back and tail. The wings are boldly patterned with slate, black, and rust. Female patterning is similar, but the back is brownish.

Varied Thrushes are definitely a western bird. Their breeding range extends as far north as Alaska through western Canada to the forests of the coasts of Washington and Oregon, and into Idaho and western Montana. They winter down the California coast to Baja. They are seldom found east of the Rocky Mountain front.

The Varied Thrush was first identified by naturalists on Captain Cook's third voyage in 1778 at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island.

It's only the beginning of January. I shouldn't be thinking about spring, but I am anxious to see a Varied Thrush in March or April foraging in my garden before he heads for the high country where he flies to the top of a fir or a hemlock, beginning to defend his territory with those discordantly eerie notes that I love so much.

Google Drawing