

BIRD OF THE MONTH

By Gail Cleveland

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRES—SUGGESTION OF SPRING



Bruce Fannehill Photo

It is late February; the snow is still covering the backyard with deep, crusty snow. I am looking for a harbinger of spring. The mountain ash berries are nearly gone, eaten by the resident winter

flock of Pine grosbeaks and an occasional flock of waxwings. But there are still a few berries at the ends of the branches. When I look out the window, I see not one, but two heralds of Spring taking advantage of the last of the berries, one common, an American robin, and the other a rare treat at our house from February through April, a Townsend's solitaire.

In other parts of the valley, Townsend's solitaires spend the winter feeding on their main winter food source, juniper berries. As the juniper berries get scarce, I imagine that they go in search of other berries to feast on, and so luckily they come to our house.

The Townsend's solitaire is a member of a large family of birds called *Turdidae*, or the thrush family, which includes bluebirds, solitaires, robins and the spotted thrushes like the Varied, Hermit and Swainson's thrush. However, it is the only North American solitaire. There are four solitaires in the Hawaiian Islands and nine in Central and South America.

At first glance, the Townsend's solitaire looks to be a slender, drab, gray bird that is shaped like a robin. On closer observation, it has a white eye ring, white outer tail feathers that are obvious in flight, and a buffy wing patch that is spotted above and below.

John James Audubon named the species in 1839 for John K. Townsend, a young Philadelphia ornithologist who collected the first specimen along

the banks of the Columbia River near Astoria, Oregon. His name is also commemorated in the Townsend's warbler that frequents our area. When Townsend was 25 years old he accompanied Thomas Nuttall on a trip across the continent for 3 ½ years, collecting bird specimens, many of which were the basis for new species.

I think the solitaire's song is particularly wonderful. It is a glorious song of prolonged warbles that seems to have no pattern and varies from male to male. It is sweet, clear and loud, and has been compared to a purple finch song. They are unusual among thrushes in that they can be heard singing throughout the year. April through June, when they establish a breeding territory, is a peak time for singing. You won't see them in the valley during this time, as they breed in the mountains up to 12,000 feet. But hike in the mountains and you might be lucky enough to hear them singing from a high perch. They also sing September through November when they come down in elevation and establish wintering territories where juniper berries are plentiful.

Another unusual trait of this member of the thrush family is their nest. Unlike other thrushes that nest in trees, solitaires nest on the ground, often partly concealed at the base of a pine or fir tree or under an overhanging bank on a mountain trail.

But finding a solitaire nest on a mountain trail is going to have to wait. Winter is still with us, but at least the robins and that rarer thrush, the Townsend's solitaire, is here; my indicators that spring will, indeed, eventually arrive.

