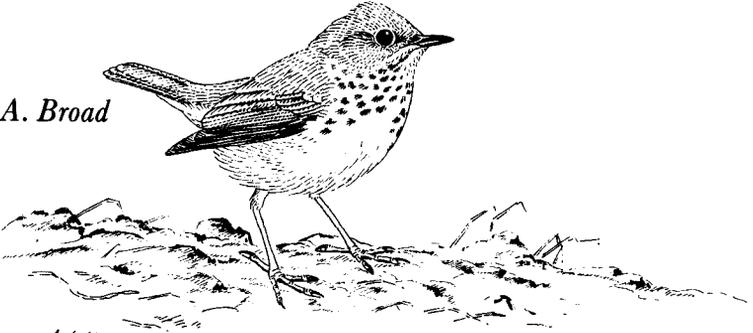


# Hermit Thrush: new to Britain and Ireland

R. A. Broad



Norman Arlott, 79.

At about 09.00 GMT on 2nd June 1975, S. Rumsey was walking through Field Croft on Fair Isle, Shetland, when he observed a small thrush-like bird with a well spotted breast and a prominent red tail feeding in the open

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on newly ploughed land. Realising that it was a species with which he was totally unfamiliar, he made careful note of the salient features and then attracted the attention of a number of other observers. H. Nash, P. J. Roberts and I were the first to arrive and we were quickly able to confirm SR's initial impressions, variously likening the bird to a small Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* with a red tail or a Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* with a heavily spotted breast. The bird proved to be both obliging and approachable, and for the rest of the day it remained around the same, small ploughed field where many observers were able to watch it quietly as it fed unconcernedly at ranges down to 9 m.

Its habits, stance and structure were typically thrush-like and, although appearing smaller, it basically resembled a Song Thrush. The upperparts were fairly uniform medium olive-brown and the underparts were clean white, boldly marked across the throat and upper breast with large blackish spots. The most distinctive feature was the tail, which was bright reddish-brown along its whole length, this colour extending onto the uppertail-coverts, where it contrasted noticeably with the brown tones of the rest of the upperparts. From some angles, the reddish colour of the uppertail-coverts appeared to extend downwards on either side around the base of the tail. The wings were a similar brown to the upperparts, but an area on the primaries and perhaps some of the outer secondaries was a warmer, more reddish hue, and there was a suggestion of a faint wing-bar on the closed

wing, formed by small pale tips to the greater coverts. The face lacked any distinctive features, although, at close range, there was a suggestion of a short, pale supercilium. Field notes were taken by several observers and, from our joint observations, we felt sure that the bird must be one of the New World thrushes, but were uncertain to which species it belonged. Having watched the bird for upwards of an hour, we sought to identify it by referring to Godfrey (1966), Peterson (1947) and Robbins *et al.* (1966). We quickly established that our notes tallied virtually word for word with Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*, and that there were no similar species showing a combination of reddish-brown tail contrasting with an olive-brown back.

When the bird was originally located in the morning, the viewing conditions could be described only as reasonable; there was a moderate to strong northeast wind blowing and the cloud cover was complete. Later, however, the clouds cleared and we were able to watch in good sunlight. During the afternoon, an unsuccessful attempt was made to mist-net the bird. Additional notes were collected on its behaviour by several observers, some of whom attempted to photograph it from the cover of a nearby stone wall, and, just before dusk, P. Jackson, watching from this same vantage point, saw the bird tower up into the sky, gaining height until it was lost from sight; it was not seen subsequently.

During the day, the following characters were recorded and agreed by all observers. It appeared to be similar in proportion to a Robin *Erithacus rubecula* or a dumpy Song Thrush and, on a number of occasions when it was chased by Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe*, which had been feeding nearby, a direct size comparison indicated that the two species were of similar size. It is quite likely, however, that some of the Wheatears were of the large Greenland form *O. o. leucorrhoa*. During these sorties, it would, when pressed, anxiously flick its wings and occasionally raise its crown feathers. Short flights from place to place were invariably low over the ground and would almost always be followed by the bird alighting with a very upright stance, bill held a little above the horizontal and tail and wings held very low, after which the tail would be slowly raised above the level of the wings. Its general feeding habits were thrush-like, taking either a series of hops or a short run, followed by a brief stop to stand upright before stooping to pick up something from the ground. At other times, it would pick up an item after making a short rush with head and neck extended, before resuming its characteristic erect stance. Although it favoured the edge of the roughly ploughed field and the bordering short-cropped grass, it also spent much time feeding between the ridges turned up by the plough and was not averse to feeding out in the open on the top of the ridges. The following description was taken in the field:

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**UPPERPARTS** Forehead, nape, mantle, scapulars and lower back all medium olive-brown, with faint greenish tinge in some lights (similar to Song Thrush). Crown similar to mantle, but a little darker and redder and apparently lacking greenish tinge. Lower rump, uppertail-coverts and all tail feathers reddish-brown, in brightness judged to be between red of tails of Thrush Nightingale and Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*. Lores and ear-coverts perhaps a little paler and more mottled than mantle, especially around eye. Supercilium indistinct, short and pale. Eye-ring incomplete and whitish. **UNDERPARTS** Chin and moustachial region white and unspotted. Throat, upper breast and anterior flanks clean white, with clear, well demarcated, large blackish spots. Lower breast, belly and vent region clean white. Lower flanks and towards base of tail washed buff. At some angles, reddish colour of rump appeared to extend downwards onto lateral undertail-coverts as patch. **WINGS** Coverts similar to mantle, but greater coverts with narrow, pale tips, giving faint



208. Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*, Shetland, June 1975 (Stephen Rumsey)

wing-bar on closed wing, which also visible in flight at close range. Primaries and secondaries darker than coverts; primaries and perhaps some outer secondaries with reddish tinge. Tertiaries similar to inner secondaries, but edged a little paler. **BARE PARTS** Bill thrush-like in structure, light brown, but paler at sides and towards base. Eyes large, dark and prominent. Legs long and pale pinkish, recalling Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* in coloration. **VOICE** No calls heard.

The breeding range of the Hermit Thrush is extensive in North America, where it occurs in a broad band stretching in the north from central Alaska across Canada to Newfoundland and extending as far south as southern California, northern New Mexico, central Minnesota and Pennsylvania, and western Maryland. It is a woodland bird, occurring in both mixed deciduous-coniferous forests and in pure coniferous stands, where it inhabits mainly the forest floor. It is recognised as one of the finest—if not the finest—singer of all North American birds. It winters from the southern parts of its breeding range to Baja California, Guatemala and southern Florida (Godfrey 1966). In Europe, it has previously been recorded as an accidental in Iceland and Germany.