
Little Brown Towhee Wears A Rusty Beanie

by: Nan Byrne

WHO IS THAT LITTLE BROWN BIRD?

Who is that L.B.B. (little brown bird)? You know, that rather dull, nondescript, overgrown-sparrow-sized one (8¼ to 10 inches long). The one that hops with cheer, generally in pairs, close to your home. Birds that display a nonchalance to human presence and have a chink-chink-ink-ink-ink metallic, not melodious, almost one-noted song.



Chances are this perky, friendly bird who cocks his head to look at you is the canyon towhee (*Pipilo fuscus*). So take a moment to look back and see that L.B.B. has more to offer than appears at first glance.



With restraint, he wears a rusty-red beanie. These tiny, inquisitive, head-top feathers can be raised and lowered at whim or will. Nothing as spectacular as the roadrunner or as impressive as the cardinal, but certainly an achievement of personality. His feathered wrap is of subtle tints and shades of brown that blend from a darker tail through a medium dark back to a buffy breast and a

downy bottom dusted rusty. Mom and dad do not have the easily-observed



distinguishing differences of many bird species, making it difficult to know if one is seeing a he or she.

Unofficially, it is said the couples have lifetime fidelity.

Their short, strong beak indicates a seed diet. To be sure, the towhee is among those present where grain has been scattered. However, there are a couple of individuals doing extermination service near my back door. Crickets, flies and moths are pursued with dedication and glee – even to scampering onto benches, tables and window sills.

The drab brown canyon towhee has a colorful cousin that frequently shows off in the Desert Foothills.¹ Rufous-sided towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) is slightly smaller, but of the same general physique as his brown relative. In coloration, rufous (red) is grand. Mister's head and under-chin bib are black. His wings and back are also black, accented with rows of white dots. Large white corners flash at the tip of a black tail. Most striking are sides of deep, rusty red, making sharp contrast with a bright white belly. Missus' costume replaces the black with a dusky brown. Judging solely from their attire, one finds it difficult to imagine the brown and the rufous to be related at all.



Spotted Towhee
Pipilo maculatus (see note 1)
[Wikipedia]

So the next time you are watching the feathered crowd in your yard and start to say, “Who is that L.B.B.?” remember that the energetic, smiley-faced, bright-eyed, year-round residents are most likely Mr. and Mrs. Brown Towhee.

October 27, 2010. The author of the above article written in July 1981 provides an update: “Unfortunately, the brown towhee is not seen regularly in this area any more. Since the latter ‘80s I have been aware that the population of this L.B.B.



seems to have declined. Its cousin Abert's towhee is now more common.

Abert's² is approximately the same size and physique, but with coloration that is paler and browner with a buff breast. Its food search characteristic of jump scratching is the same. But it exchanges its rufous bottom and throat for a black mask around its bill and eyes and embracing the base of the bill.



Abert's Towhee

Pipilo aberti

[Wikipedia]

At first glance one might think he is playing Zorro. Abert's is not as comfortable with two-leggeds as Brownie is.

¹ Editor's Note: *Pipilo erythrophthalmus* is the Eastern Towhee. In Kaufman, *Field Guide to Birds of North America*, its range is given as east of the Mississippi River. Wikipedia comments: "The taxonomy of the [towhees](#) has been under debate in recent decades, and formerly this bird and the [Spotted Towhee](#) were considered a single species, the Rufous-sided Towhee." The Spotted Towhee is *Pipilo maculatus*, whose range includes Arizona and whose markings fit the description of the author.

² Editor's Note: *Pipilo aberti*. See article in [Wikipedia](#).

