
Small birds give ground to thrasher

by: Nan Byrne¹

YOU'LL KNOW ME BY MY DISTINCTIVE WHISTLE

Observing the sights and adventures at a backyard feeder can be fun. However, identifying the different birds can sometimes be difficult for area newcomers.

One bird that does not like cities, but is abundant in our foothills, is the Curve-billed Thrasher or *Toxostoma curvirostre*. He belongs to the family called *Mimidae*.

He is about 10 inches long, with a brownish-gray desert adobe colored body. His breast is the same color as his body, but very faintly mottled. His tail is long, slender

and dark; his wings are short; and his bill is long and curves downward.



Curve-billed Thrasher
courtesy Wikipedia

His one characteristic that is hard to miss is the orange to red-orange eye which differentiates him from other thrashers in Arizona.

He is a year-round resident of the foothills, preferring open brushy desert where cholla, mesquite and palo verde are present.

His long bill indicates an insect eater. He can also dig with his bill and can be seen scavenging about on the ground in desert brush, looking for a tasty morsel.

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His diet includes ants, beetles, spiders, grasshoppers, crickets and caterpillars. He also enjoys prickly pear fruit and seeds of various grasses and desert plants.

He often will choose a cholla for his nesting site, the chain fruit cholla being a favorite. The nest is a large, messy affair made of small twigs on the outside and lined on the inside with grasses, horsehair or other soft material.

Near the end of April, the female lays three to four pale-turquoise eggs with small specks. The incubation period is about two weeks; and both parents share in caring for the young for the 14 to 18 days they are in the nest.



When observed at a backyard feeder, the thrasher demonstrates that he is high in the pecking order. The smaller birds, including finches, sparrows and cardinals, will scatter when the thrasher decides it's his turn to feed.

Although his personality is considered aggressive, he seems to peacefully share an area with cactus wrens, cardinals, towhees and quail.

Some birds hop on both feet at once, but his gait seems to be one-foot-then-the-other, pause and then run again. He is quite comical when seen running along the ground from bush to bush.

Whatever he is lacking in beauty, he certainly makes up for in his glorious song. He will perch high on a saguaro and whistle his loud clear "whitwheet."

In the spring, he will sing out long lyrical medleys to his mate, who will listen and then answer back to him in her own concocted syllables.

Maybe in the spring when you hear his vibrant song and see his snappy orange eyes, you can become better acquainted with this fascinating desert dweller.

