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Observations of Townsend's Solitaires (*Myadestes townsendi*) on Mount Magazine in Logan County, Arkansas

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Running Title: Townsend's Solitaires on Mount Magazine

Townsend's Solitaires (*Myadestes townsendi*) (Fig. 1) normally range throughout the Rocky Mountains. In winter months they are known to occur eastward into the Midwest, with occasional reports from eastern states. Range maps in most bird field guides do not indicate that they visit Arkansas. However, the range map for Townsend's Solitaire in Dunn and Alderfer (2017) has a small symbol indicating an "extent of irregular or irruptive range in some winters" in northwestern Arkansas. This was based on multiple reports from Mount Magazine in Logan County beginning in 2005 that are summarized in this report.



Figure 1. Townsend's Solitaire *Myadestes townsendi* photographed by Simons on Mount Magazine on 15 January 2008.

Townsend's Solitaires were previously considered to be a rare bird in Arkansas. Prior to 1986, there was only one record of a bird near Springdale (Washington County) during winter of 1963-1964 (James and Neil 1986). Since that time, single birds were discovered in February of 1991, October of 1995, and January 2001 (Arkansas Audubon Society 2015).

Mount Magazine rises out of the Arkansas River Valley over 670 m (2,200 ft) to an elevation of 840 m (2,753 ft) above mean sea level. It is the highest point in

Arkansas and the highest point between the Minnesota/Canada border and the Gulf of Mexico. The mountain supports a variety of plant communities including Eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) thickets just above bluff lines along the north and south facing rims. A lodge and cabin complex is located approximately 1.5 km along the south rim with cabin #1 being the western most. The northern rim of the mountaintop includes a scenic overlook drive and hiking. The eastern end of the mountain is split into two legs by Bear Hollow, which has redcedar thickets along its northern rim.

Mount Magazine is presently the only known (in Arkansas) and eastern most breeding site for the Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps*) (Collins 1999). A small population was discovered on the southern rim, below the lodge and cabin complex in 1972. The population, present throughout the year, has fluctuated over the years (James and Neal 1986).

There is a seldom used term in the birding world called the "Arizona Roadside Rest Area Effect" (Arizona Audubon Society 2011). Someone reports a rare bird at a highway rest area prompting other birders to visit the site. They report additional unexpected species, bringing more attention to the site. This is how Simons and others accidentally became aware that solitaires were wintering on Mount Magazine.

A Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) was discovered on Cameron Bluff Overlook Drive on 17 December 2005. It was reported to the Arkansas Rare Bird Alert system. The next morning the bunting could not be relocated. During the search, a pair of solitaires was discovered feeding in an Eastern redcedar at the first parking area on Cameron Bluff drive. This information was posted on the rare bird alert and many birders drove up Mount Magazine to add solitaires to their lists. The last known date this pair was seen on the mountain was 6 March 2006. This was the Arkansas's 5th record for the species.

A single solitaire was found on 2 April 2007. This bird was foraging in cedars along the southern rim of the

mountaintop west of the cabin complex and was seen by a group of experienced observers 4 days later. This bird was silent. It was not relocated afterwards.

Suspecting the occurrence of solitaires on Mount Magazine might be more common, Simons began purposefully searching cedar thickets for them each November and December. Searches began with simple observation on the edge of cedar thickets. After a period of about ten minutes with no solitaires, he played a recording of their song on an iPod.

When present, birds responded almost immediately by flying high and dropping down to perch on an exposed treetop. If a pair was defending a territory, one would perch close to the source of the sound and the other further away. Often the nearest one would start to call with single whistle-like notes. On a few occasions, it (presumably a male) would begin to sing a song described as “a loud, complex, melodious warbling”. The song was only uttered when in the presence of a second (probably a female) who seemed to be more passive by staying further away.

On 9 January 2008 a single solitaire was located on Cameron Bluff. It was last seen on 1 March 2008.

Drought affected the cedar berry crop for several years. No solitaires were reported until 23 December 2012 when 3 were found on the rim above Ross Hollow which is between Cameron Bluff and Brown Springs. That winter, solitaires also appeared on the southern rim of the mountain at the hang glider launch, below the lodge, and near the eastern most cabin. Also, there was an unconfirmed report of a solitaire along the Bear Hollow trail on the eastern part of the park. We suspect there could have had more than 3 solitaires in the park that season. The last sighting for any of these birds was 17 April 2013.

Four solitaires spent winter from 14 November 2014 through 22 February 2015 along the rim of Ross Hollow. On one occasion, a solitaire broke out into song from a prominent perch along the western rim when another flew across from the eastern side to harass the singer then returned to the eastern side.

Playback of a solitaire song one afternoon in November 2014 resulted in the audible response of a Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). The owl was only heard and was not located. Until recent banding efforts (Pruitt and Smith 2016), saw-whets was considered rare in Arkansas.

Two solitaires were discovered below the cabins east of the lodge on 28 December 2017. One was seen feeding on winged sumac (*Rhus copallina*) berries. The last sighting was 27 January 2018.

In summary, since 2005, Simons has been able to confirm the occurrence of solitaires on Mount Magazine 6 out of 13 winters. Each time many birders and bird photographers made special efforts to add this species to their lists on Mount Magazine without looking for them in other areas with similar habitat. This suggests solitaires are probably overlooked in suitable cedar habitat in other parts of Arkansas. During this period, there was only one report of a solitaire in Arkansas not found on Mount Magazine. That bird was at Holla Bend National Wildlife Refuge on 10 January 2010 (Arkansas Audubon Society 2015), about 50 km due east of Mount Magazine.

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