



Louisiana Waterthrush



Photo: © Dan Garber

Scientific name

Parkesia motacilla

Taxon

Birds

COSEWIC Status

Threatened

Canadian range

Ontario, Quebec

Reason for Designation

During the breeding season in Canada, this songbird nests along clear, shaded, coldwater streams and forested wetlands in southern Ontario and southwestern Quebec. It occupies a similar habitat niche in Latin America during the winter. The Canadian population is small, probably consisting of fewer than 500 adults, but breeding pairs are difficult to detect. Population trends for the Canadian population are uncertain. Declines have been noted in some parts of the Canadian range, particularly in its stronghold in southwestern Ontario, while new pairs have been found in others. Immigration of individuals from the northeastern U.S. is thought to be important to maintaining the Canadian population. However, while the U.S. source population currently appears to be fairly stable, it may be subject to future population declines due to emerging threats to habitat.

Wildlife Species Description and Significance

The Louisiana Waterthrush (*Parkesia motacilla*) is a relatively large, drab wood-warbler that resembles a small thrush. Males and females are identical in appearance. The upper parts are dull brown. The lower parts are cream-coloured, with dark streaking on the breast and flanks. A bold, broad, white streak over the eye extends to the nape. The legs are bubble-gum pink, and the bill is rather long and heavy for a warbler.

Distribution

Most of the global breeding range (>99%) is within the eastern United States. In Canada, the Louisiana Waterthrush breeds in southern Ontario, where it is considered a rare, but regular local summer resident. It is also a rare, but sporadic breeder in southwestern Quebec. The bulk of the Canadian population is concentrated in two areas of Ontario: the Norfolk Sand Plain region bordering the north shore of Lake Erie, and the central Niagara Escarpment between Hamilton and Owen Sound.

Its wintering range extends from northern Mexico through Central America to extreme northwestern South America, and also throughout the West Indies.



Global distribution of Louisiana Waterthrush (*Parkesia motacilla*), showing breeding, migrating, and wintering range. Map based on Ridgely et al. 2007; prepared by Environment and Climate Change Canada.

Habitat

The Louisiana Waterthrush occupies specialized habitat, showing a strong preference for nesting and wintering along relatively pristine headwater streams and wetlands situated in large tracts of mature forest. Although it prefers running water (especially clear, coldwater streams), it also inhabits heavily wooded swamps with vernal or semi-permanent pools, where its territories can overlap with its sister species the Northern Waterthrush. It is often classified as both an area-sensitive forest species, and a riparian-obligate species. Louisiana Waterthrush nests are constructed within niches in steep stream banks, in the roots of uprooted trees, or in mossy logs and stumps, usually within a few metres of water.

Biology

The Louisiana Waterthrush is a long-distance migrant that typically arrives in southern Ontario much earlier in the spring than other neotropical songbirds. It displays annual fidelity to both breeding and wintering sites. Louisiana Waterthrush clutch size ranges from 4-6 eggs and incubation extends from 12-14 days. The species is generally single-brooded.

The Louisiana Waterthrush spends most of its time on or near the ground, along the margins of streams and pools. It has a specialized diet, feeding mostly on aquatic macro-invertebrates, especially insects, and sometimes eats small molluscs, fish, crustaceans, and amphibians.

Population Sizes and Trends

The Canadian population is estimated to be 235 to 575 adults. Population trends are poorly understood. The species has declined locally in parts of Canada in the past century and in the past few decades (related to habitat degradation and/or population fluctuations), but targeted surveys have found higher numbers in some parts of the Canadian range in recent years. Overall, populations in Canada and much of the U.S. currently appear to be relatively stable.

Threats and Limiting Factors

The Louisiana Waterthrush is a habitat specialist and its global population is limited by the supply of high-quality aquatic habitat on both its breeding and wintering grounds. There is no single imminent threat to the survival of the Canadian population; rather, it is the cumulative effects of many threats at different stages of its annual life cycle that are of particular concern. Habitat loss and changes in water quality/quantity due to agricultural intensification, and suburban residential development may have contributed to declines observed in parts of southern Ontario. Habitat conditions in Canada are expected to deteriorate due to the anticipated spread of Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, an exotic forest pest,

into eastern Canada. Habitat fragmentation and degradation on its U.S. breeding grounds due to the combination of exotic forest pests and resource development could reduce immigration into the Canadian population. Habitat loss and degradation, including degraded water quality and deforestation due to agricultural and development activities, are ongoing threats in the wintering range. During migration, this species also experiences relatively high rates of mortality due to collisions with tall buildings and communication towers.

Protection, Status and Ranks

The *Migratory Birds Convention Act* currently provides the most specific legislation protecting the Louisiana Waterthrush in Canada. A high proportion of known nesting sites are in protected areas. The specific habitats used by this species in Ontario are also provided some protection through various legislative policies. In addition, their physical characteristics generally preclude most kinds of agricultural and development activities.

Source: COSEWIC. 2015. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Louisiana Waterthrush *Parkesia motacilla* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. xi + 58 pp.

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