

SPOTTED TOWHEE**Donald Shephard*****Pipilio maculatus***

Spotted
Towhee
photo
courtesy
Nature.

Enjoy a slow stroll through the woods and thickets in the Botanical Gardens and you might hear some scritch-scratching in the leaves and underbrush that sounds like a squirrel rustling. Look low in shrubs or along the ground in places with rich leaf litter and dense stems. Often the sound emanates from a Spotted Towhee, hopping over the ground beneath dense tangles of shrubs, scratching in leaf litter for food. It makes a lot of noise for such a small bird. You might also see one bathing in dew or fog drip on vegetation or, on occasion, eating at a suet or seed feeder. Spotted Towhees are likely to visit – or perhaps live in – your yard if you’ve got brushy, shrubby, or overgrown borders. If your feeders are near a vegetated edge, towhees may venture out to eat fallen seed. If you want to attract towhees to your feeders, consider sprinkling some seed on the ground, as this is where towhees prefer to feed.

When you catch sight of one, the deep chestnut flanks and sides combined with the male's solid black head, red eye, and black upperparts are striking. They are gleaming black above, spotted and striped with brilliant white. Birds can be hard to see in the leaf litter, so your best chance for an unobstructed look may be in the spring, when males climb into the shrub tops to sing their buzzy songs.

The Towhee uses the “double scratch” method of foraging. In one sequence, with a relatively stationary body, a slight hop allows the feet to reach far forward, and then kick back leaf mould to reveal primarily seeds. In the breeding season they eat and feed their young many insects and other arthropods.

You may wonder why Spotted Towhee is included in a series of articles on sparrows. We must venture from the familiar, but often misleading common names, into the less comfortable

SPOTTED TOWHEE

continued

scientific nomenclature. New world sparrows, all closely related, are called Emberizids by ornithologists. This family of songbirds includes American sparrows, juncos, some buntings, longspurs, and towhees. The majority of Emberizids are brown-patterned, ground-dwelling with short, conical bills. They vary from the small and intricately patterned Le Conte's Sparrow to the large and plain California Towhee. The genus gained its name, *Pipilo*, from the call of the Rufous-sided Towhee while the species name, *maculatus*, simply means spotted. In 1995, the Rufous-sided Towhee was split into two species, the Eastern Towhee and the Spotted Towhee.

Large for a sparrow, 8.5 inches in length compared to the 7 inch White-crowned Sparrow, the Spotted Towhee has a thick, pointed bill, short neck, chunky body, and long, rounded tail. The white-spotted black back, black rump, black breast, white belly, rufous sides, black wings with white spots are distinctive. A black head indicate a male while the female shows a grayish brown head and both have red eyes. Spotted Towhees take short, bounding flights, alternating rapid wing beats with wings pulled to sides. In summer you may spot juveniles with heavy streaking, brown above and buffy below.

Towhees prefer to forage in areas with a thick layer of leaf litter and a screen of foliage and twigs low to the ground which makes them harder to see than to hear. These birds sometimes forage in trees as well, a practice that is most common in spring. Spotted Towhees occasionally sun themselves, lying down on the grass with feathers spread. They have several distinctive calls and songs. Towhees readily respond to 'pishing.'

In March, males proclaim their territories by singing. In April, the female selects a nest site on, or close to, the ground at the edge of a thicket. She builds it with bark, grass, and leaves, and lines it with pine needles and hair. When she builds on the ground, she sinks the nest so that the rim of the nest cup is even with the litter surface. When disturbed, a nesting female may run away like a mouse rather than fly. Cowbirds parasitize Spotted Towhee nests.

She lays 3 to 5 grayish or creamy-white eggs tinged with green and reddish-brown spots which may form a wreath or cap. Incubation lasts for 12 to 14 days. Both parents feed the young who leave the nest at 9 to 11 days, but do not fly for another six days. The parents continue to feed the young, which stay in the home territory for about 30 days after they leave the nest.

The conservation status of this species is Least Concern since they are widespread and common. Common or not, the scratching sound may alert you to Spotted Towhees, you may "pish" him into displaying for you, or you may spot her in your garden. In any case, enjoy this colorful and noisy sparrow.



Spotted Towhee nest photo Conan Guard