

BIRD EXPLORER



Spotted Towhee. Photo: Anne Goff.

The cheerful Spotted Towhee

BY HEATHER PALADINI

A common backyard bird in our region is the Spotted Towhee, *Pipilo maculatus*. Spotted Towhees are cheerful and beautiful birds.

A member of the sparrow or Passerellidae family, Spotted Towhees are widespread and abundant and may frequent or even live in your backyard. Spotted Towhees are more likely to be found scratching the ground and leaf litter beneath a bird feeder than at the bird feeder itself, and you'll have more luck if your feeder is in or near shrubby vegetation under which they can seek cover.

They tend to scratch and hop backward with both feet, which is fun to observe. They can also be seen in lower branches of shrubs searching for insects and berries. Spotted Towhees are omnivorous. In the winter, they eat more plant foods, including berries, seeds, and acorns. In spring and summer, they also eat invertebrates, particularly arthropods.

The Spotted Towhee is larger than a sparrow and smaller than a robin, on

average seven and three-fourths inches long with an 11-inch wingspan. The upper parts and throat of the males are jet-black, while in females they are grayish brown. They have striking red eyes, warm rufous flanks that blend in with leaf litter, and a white belly. Their wings and backs have white spots, and their rounded tail feathers have white corners.

Spotted Towhees can fly long distances but can more often be seen running along the ground between sources of shade and cover. During the breeding season, males can spend 70 to 90 percent of their mornings singing to attract a mate. Once they find a mate, they resort to singing only five percent of the time.

If you'd like to attract more Spotted Towhees to your feeders, fill the feeders with a seed mix combining suet, cracked corn, millet, sunflower seeds, peanuts, and mealworms. Be sure to place feeders near or in vegetated areas; then sit back and wait for these chipper birds to peek out from under cover.

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■ **WILDFIRE RISK**

Continued from page 1

in the drought stress experienced by local trees that were already on the hot and dry end of their range. Drought and heat decrease their ability to fight off pests, such as the flatheaded fir borer. These beetles are native to our valley and historically would attack only dead and dying trees, but now that most of the forest is under stress, the beetles are feeding on what appears to be otherwise healthy Douglas firs, leading to mortality on a scale not seen before.

The altered state of our forests poses a wide variety of hazards, not the least of which is the threat faced by firefighters tasked with our safety. Decades of fire exclusion have allowed fuels to accumulate on the landscape, setting the stage for escalating wildfire intensity. In 2022, two wildland firefighters were killed by falling trees in southwestern Oregon. Consequently, the way wildland fires are fought in the Applegate may need to rely more on aerial attacks and backfires rather than on more dangerous direct attacks.

These changes will likely result in increased costs for fire suppression as well as many more acres burned. This was demonstrated by the Upper Applegate fire in June 2024. According to the Oregon Department of Forestry, the total cost to fight that 1,040-acre fire was \$10.5 million. Such a significant expense for such a relatively small fire is not sustainable, and we were lucky to have the resources needed to fight this fire. In my opinion, the only long-term ecologically and economically viable method to reduce wildfire risk is through controlled burning, and mechanical fuels reduction is the first step required to set the stage for the application of prescribed fire. My next article will delve into how local organizations and state and federal agencies are working to get our forests to that point, and what residents can do to help in that effort.

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Upper Applegate Fire, as viewed from the hills above Sterling Creek Road. Photo: Nathan Gehres.

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