

New Mexico Ornithological Society
Rare Bird Report

Species: Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*)

Date: 16 December 2012 (on Albuquerque Christmas Bird Count)

Location: New Mexico, Bernalillo County, at Los Poblanos Fields Open Space, in the far northwest corner at the community gardens.

Time: 1030 -- 1145

Number of birds: 1

Age/sex: female, age unknown

Observers: David Mehlman, Erin Greenlee, Mymm Ackley

Writer: David Mehlman, 322 Tyler Road NW, Albuquerque, NM 87107; 505-344-9264; mehlmand@earthlink.net

Date written: 18 December 2012, from memory and notes made at the time

Equipment used: Bausch & Lomb Elite 8x42 binoculars, Swarovski spotting scope, Canon PowerShot G5 camera

Distance to bird: variable, from 10 -- 30 feet

Behavior: Was first seen in a dense shrub thicket and we first dismissed it as a Spotted Towhee, which I have seen at the same spot numerous times. However, Ackley called our attention to the fact that the bird had no spots, which merited further investigation. The bird frequently remained deep in the shrub thicket, but responded several times to pishing and playback (see below) by popping up into taller shrubs and even flying near the top of much taller cottonwood, Russian olive, and Siberian elm trees, then it dropped back down again.

Vocalizations: called repeatedly, most often giving the typical nasal “mew” call of a Spotted Towhee, but about every 10-15 calls, it gave an Eastern “chewink” call (we heard this 3-4 times total); the bird responded to playbacks of Spotted calls from both Audubon Guides and Sibley apps on iPhones.

Plumage description: A typical “Rufous-sided” Towhee: white belly, distinct broad chestnut flanks, dark upper parts, including all of the head, conical finch-like bill. All chocolate-brown head, back, and wings, with no white on the upperparts except for a small wing spot and stripe on the closed wing and narrow white stripes along the edge of the tertials. Extremely similar to the photograph of a female Eastern shown in the Audubon Guides app on the iPhone.

Lighting: cloudy to sunny, at times the bird perched in full sun.

Other species: The species for this bird to be separated from is Spotted Towhee. The combination of very restricted white on the upperparts (only the tertial edges), the noticeable white spot and stripe in the closed wing, and overall distinct chocolate brown of the upper parts are diagnostic for a female Eastern. The fact that the bird gave Spotted Towhee calls was confusing, but the bird did give some Eastern calls and others we consulted with later support the fact that Easterns will give Spotted calls. We are confident of our identification, but the location has been shared widely, so confirmation should be able to be obtained.

Familiarity with species: Mehlman is very familiar with both Eastern and Spotted Towhee plumages and calls, the former since he grew up and began birding in the East. However, since most of this occurred “pre-split”, field separation of the two species is new for him. However, we saw this bird very well over an extended period of time, and were able to compare in the field with several different field guides on iPhones.

Other documentation: see attached photographs taken by Mehlman

Photograph 1: 16 December 2012, 11:44 AM (cropped and magnified from original). Poorly focused photo, but shows the bird in full sun with the chocolate-brown upperparts and white wing spot. Original photo ID: IMG_0111.



Photograph 2: 16 December 2012, 11:44 AM. Digiscoped photo, with back toward the camera (cropped and magnified from original). Shows the absence of white on the upperparts, with the exception of the white tertial edges and white wing stripe. Original photo ID: IMG_0105.



Photograph 3: 16 December 2012, 11:44 AM. Perched bird in partial shade (cropped and magnified from original). Clearly shows the white wing spot and associated narrow stripe in the closed wing. Original photo ID: IMG_0110.

