

The Faces of Wetlands: Northern Waterthrush

This article is one of a series about the plants and animals found in Minnesota wetlands.



Photo: Cornell Lab of Ornithology

The Northern Waterthrush is a small songbird with a brown back and a whitish, creamy underside with dark stripes. They winter from Florida to South America, and spend their summer at their breeding grounds from Alaska to New Jersey. They're also a bird with of paradox. Despite being widespread, they're tricky to find. Despite being called a thrush, they're actually a warbler. Unlike most warblers, waterthrush feed on the ground. Instead of the canopy they prefer low, dense, shrubby vegetation. They specialize in wet spaces such as wooded swamps, bogs, and lakeshores. They prefer still water, but that doesn't mean they like to stay still. Perhaps the most defining trait of the Northern Waterthrush is its constant tail bob as it strolls through the underbrush. One theory for this behavior suggests that the movement flushes out insects for meals on-the-go. Another says the bounce warns predators that this little bird is agile and attentive to its surroundings. Clearly, the motionless perching mourning dove is a better bargain for lunch.

During migration months (April/May and September) Northern Waterthrush make pit stops in parks and backyards, especially if there's a dense hideout or wet spot where it can glean a few insects. The Vadnais/Sucker Lake Park is a great spot to glimpse them, specifically the walking trail North of County Road F, when a path veers off of the paved trail and goes towards the channel bridge. North Oaks residents can find several hotspots for waterthrush along the Lake Wilkinson and Black Lake walking trails, in the North Oaks conservation easement area. Tamarack Nature Center, Gem Lake Golf Course, and Columbia Park in White Bear Township are also likely waterthrush stopovers.

In an office enriched with songs of printers, waterthrush seem a world away. Here, yoga is one of our common lunch room talking points. A co-worker who's also a yoga teacher in her off-hours gave me a "desk yoga" chart. Pinned up under the fluorescent light, it depicts 12 simple stretches to encourage clarity and focus during the day. Sure, it sounds simple, but the chart quickly blends into the rest of my ornate cubicle scenery and is no match for the beast that is the to-do list. Yet motivation can come from unlikely places. When a skeptical, practical engineer raves about a yoga class his wife took him to, I find myself re-evaluating my notion of what is "productive" and suddenly remember to glance at my yoga chart. After just a few minutes of focused breathing and stretching, my mindset shifts. Perhaps productivity comes with a dose of paradox. Perhaps the Northern Waterthrush isn't really a world away after all?

From my beginner knowledge of yoga, I've learned that each pose, breath, and sequence is a game played between the conscious and sub-conscious self. When focusing on the breath and coming to the present moment, the logical busy-brain can take a back seat. This is when the sub-conscious, unseen mind can have some space, look at the road map, and plan the journey ahead. "What am I stuck on? What do I really believe I can and can't do? Why do I think what I do? Where do I want to go next?"

The Northern Waterthrush can serve as a metaphor for the sub-conscious self. When out on a walk it's easy to focus on the tree line, eagles flying overhead, and bright fluffy clouds. While sunny overlooks are indeed beautiful and important to appreciate, the dark, unseen places also have something to offer. Instead of being guided by the usual, visible trail markers, the hidden brush of the waterthrush forces us to look inward to decide where to go. But these dense wet spots are also not easy places to appreciate. Like yoga practice, it takes work to see and value the messy, mysterious places of wetlands as well as our mind. Only when we stop and observe these less romantic, buggy, and seemingly unproductive parts of the trail do we notice the birds and animals that find refuge in the dense cover. Only when we work with the dark, buggy, dense debris of our mind, do we dissolve our fear of it. In the process we stretch our sense of appreciation, and carve out a place of refuge where there was once paradox.

Perhaps with practice we'll peer into the shadows to find an agile, attentive little bird bouncing and bobbing along.

Learn more about VLAWMO's 500+ wetlands and how we work to ensure a no-net-loss of wetlands through the Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) on our website;
<http://www.vlawmo.org/waterbodies/wetlands>

-Nick Voss, VLAWMO Education and Outreach Coordinator

Sources:

www.allaboutbirds.org

www.audobon.org

<https://www.birdnote.org/show/northern-waterthrush>