

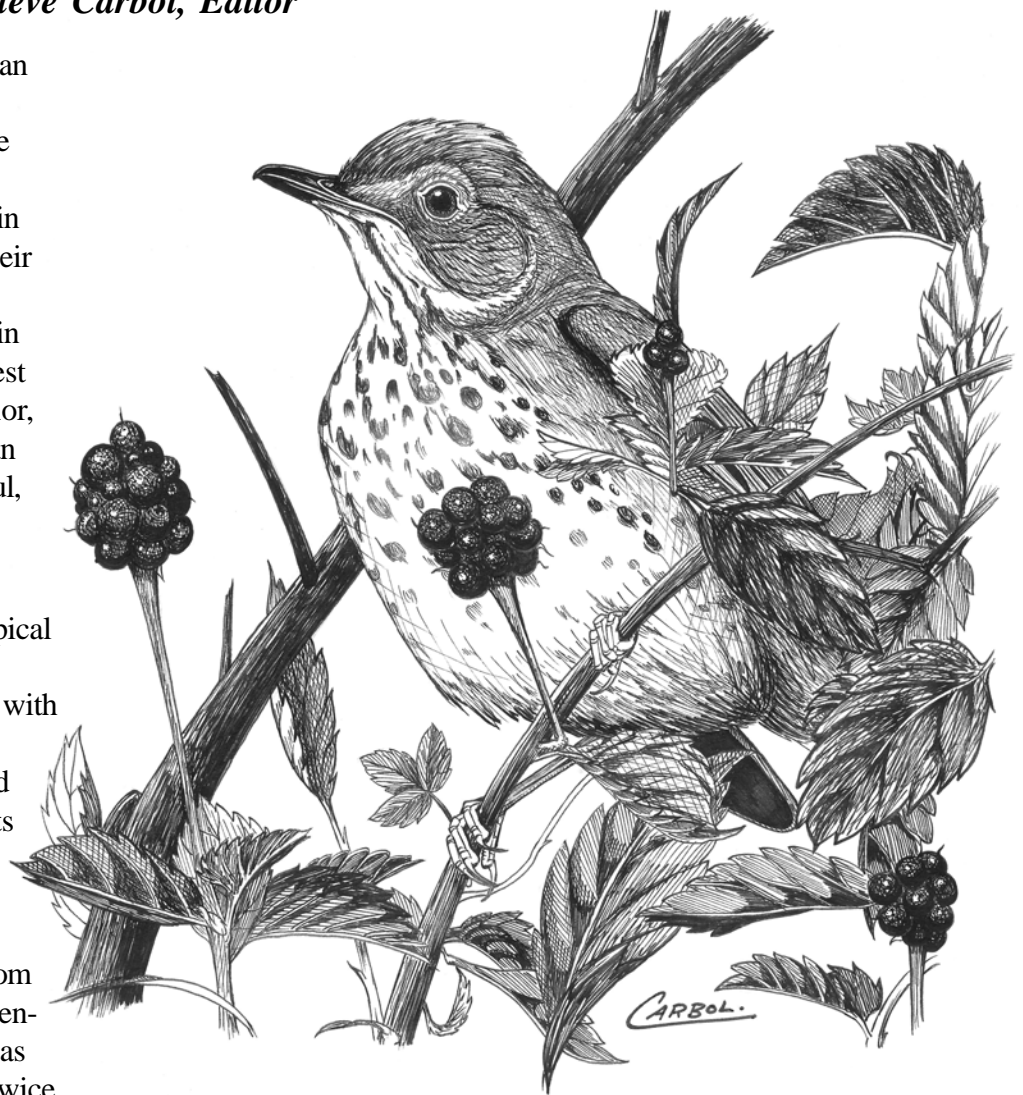
BIRD IS THE WORD: SWAINSON'S THRUSH

Article and Illustration by Steve Carbol, Editor

Many are familiar with the American Robin and Eastern Bluebird, popular songbirds steeped in American culture and conscience. But what of other members of the thrush family? Most in North America are the antithesis of their famous rusty-breasted cousins; deep woodland denizens, skulkers garbed in subdued earth tones of the shady forest understory. For what they lack in color, the drab woodland thrushes more than make up for it with hauntingly beautiful, unforgettable ethereal songs. The Swainson's Thrush is one such bird.

The Swainson's Thrush is fairly typical of the North American woodland thrushes. Indeed, it is often confused with its similar-looking kin, the Veery and Gray-cheeked, Bicknell's, Hermit and Wood Thrush. It stands apart from its relatives in that it sports buffy "spectacles" that encircle its eyes and has significantly longer wing feathers to facilitate its long distance migration from wintering grounds as far south as Argentina to its breeding range as far north as Newfoundland and Alaska. On this twice annual trek, many Swainson's Thrush travel through southwest Florida. Numbers of Swainson's Thrushes are currently moving through the Sunshine State as this article goes to print.

The thrush's common name, given by Nuttall in 1840, is in honor of early 19th century English ornithologist, William Swainson. As for its Latin or scientific name, *Catharus ustulatus*, it is not so clearly defined. *Catharus* has its origins in the Greek, *katharos*, meaning "pure". This word was used by Pallas in naming the related Hermit Thrush in 1811. It refers to the clear melodic quality of the



Hermit Thrush's song. Luckily, the word also finds meaning in the pretty song of the closely related Swainson's Thrush. The bird's specific name, *ustulatus*, translates as "burnt" or "scorched" and refers to ash in particular. Though Swainson's Thrush may sometimes be found nesting on the edges of burnt boreal forest, *ustulatus* refers to the ashy, cold olive-gray color that predominates in the bird's plumage.

If lucky, one may hear the voice of the Swainson's Thrush, a stirring, spiraling flute-like song that lilts up the scale. More commonly, Swainson's Thrush utter a short Spring Peeper-like, "bwee". Swainson's Thrush, like the other woodland thrushes mentioned earlier, are nocturnal migrants. So, next time you happen to be out after dark in the spring, cast an ear upward and listen for the river of migrants flowing north overhead. You may just be able to pick out the "pure, burnt" songster, the Swainson's Thrush.