

LOUISIANA BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

REPORT FORM

This form is intended as a convenience in reporting observations of species on the Louisiana Bird Records Committee (LBRC) Review List. The LBRC recommends the use of this form or a similar format when submitting records for review (to assure that all pertinent information is accounted for). Attach additional pages as necessary. Please print or type. Attach xerox of field notes, drawings, photographs, or tape recordings, if available. Include all photos for more obscurely marked species. When completed, mail to Secretary, Louisiana Bird Records Committee, c/o Museum of Natural Science, 119 Foster Hall, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-3216.

1. English and Scientific names: *Spotted Towhee, Pipilo maculatus*
2. Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage (e.g., 2 in alternate plumage): *One male*
3. Locality: Parish: Cameron
Specific Locality: Gayle Farm (29.9653, -93.0091), 1.65 mi SE of LA-384 southern terminus
4. Date(s) when observed: *18 Dec 2017*
5. Time(s) of day when observed: *ca. 1050-1055 CST*
6. Reporting observer and address: *Robert C. Dobbs, Lafayette, LA*
7. Other observers accompanying reporter who also *identified* the bird(s): *Mac Myers*
8. Other observers who independently identified the bird(s): *none*
9. Light conditions (position of bird in relation to shade and to direction and amount of light): *Overcast, but fairly bright, sky at mid-day. Observed bird both in shadows of scrubby veg and perched in open.*
10. Optical equipment (type, power, condition): *Swarovski 8x30 binos (good condition), Nikon AF-S 300 mm 1:4 D camera lens (good condition)*
11. Distance to bird(s): *5-10 m*
12. Duration of observation: *about 5 min*

13. Habitat: Scrubby thicket of rose brambles, bordering ag/pasture and marsh.

14. Behavior of bird / circumstances of observation (flying, feeding, resting; include and stress habits used in identification; relate events surrounding observation): The bird was in a rose thicket when we found it; I suspect it was calling in response to us playing a screech-owl/mobbing sequence before we saw it. I assumed it was an Eastern Towhee (EATO) by call, and didn't pay too much attention to it initially. I then saw a Spotted Towhee (SPTO), and got a few photos. I called Mac over, and we played back SPTO calls to better document the bird. The bird responded positively, approaching and emerging up in the thicket and calling, at which point we realized, much to our surprise of course, that the bird was giving EATO-like calls. We saw the bird's bill move as it gave EATO-like calls... numerous times. We stopped the SPTO playback, I made audio recordings of the bird's EATO-like calls, and a few minutes later we played back actual EATO calls. It seemed to respond positively to EATO calls as well, but not as strongly as it had to the SPTO calls... who knows if there is any significance to that less emphatic response. It had been responding for a while at that point, and could have simply been losing interest.

15. Description (include only what was actually seen, *not what "should" have been seen*; include if possible: total length/relative size compared to other familiar species, body bulk, shape, proportions, bill, eye, leg, and plumage characteristics. Stress features that separate it from similar species): The bird looked like a typical male Spotted Towhee, with jet black head, nape, throat and breast; unmarked white belly; orangy-rufous sides. Red eye. Black back and upper wing with bold white feather edging and feather tips scapulars, tertials, and secondary coverts. Long black tail with white corners. Some white edging on primaries, but not at base of primaries. Photos suggest a buff tinge to some of the white spotting on the back/scapulars.

16. Voice: The bird called many times, but we only heard it give a single, EATO-like call, a rising, metallic, somewhat nasal "zree." We never heard it give anything different, and we never heard a SPTO-like call (with which I am familiar). It's not clear to me if the bird was calling prior to our playback of SPTO calls, but I suspect it was... we heard EATO-like calls while broadcasting screech-owl/mobbing playback, but there was also an EATO at the site, so it's hard to know.

17. Similar species (include how they were eliminated by your observation): EATO and EATO x SPTO hybrid are the only candidates for confusion. "Pure" EATO is easily eliminated by the conspicuous white spotting on the bird's wings and back. An EATO x SPTO hybrid is more difficult to eliminate, but may be expected (?) to show at least some reduced spotting on back or upper wings, or some presence of a white spot at the base of the primaries.

18. Photographs or tape recordings obtained? (by whom? Attached?): Yes, photos and audio by me (attached). Mac also got photos.

19. Previous experience with this species: Much experience, visual and aural, with both Spotted and Eastern towhees.

20. Identification aids: (list books, illustrations, other birders, etc. used in identification):

a. at time of observation: none

b. after observation: Xeno-Canto and Macaulay Library (vocalizations). Sibley Guide. Personal communication with Steve Mlodinow (who has much experience in the “rufous-sided” towhee hybrid zone in eastern Colorado).

21. This description is written from: notes made during the observation (notes attached? see: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41177858>); _____ notes made after the observation (date: _____); memory; images taken during the observation.

22. Are you positive of your identification if not, explain: No; a Spotted Towhee giving an Eastern Towhee call is problematic and immediately raises concern about hybrid potential. If it was a hybrid, however, one might expect at least some plumage markings to be reminiscent of EATO (e.g., reduced spotting in the back or wings, and/or vestige of white at the base of the primaries, as shown in Sibley’s illustration of SPTO x EATO hybrids). That is not the case, and the bird is visually spot-on for SPTO. (Also, labelling this bird as a hybrid, without better evidence anyway, would call into question the “purity” of any non-vocal Spotted Towhee in Louisiana.)

I suggest that our bird was, indeed, a Spotted Towhee, and that it was mimicking an Eastern Towhee. This is well-described in “rufous-sided” towhees. Greenlaw et al. (1998) described six EATO individuals, from widely different geographic areas, substituting their own alarm calls with mimicked alarm calls of three other species (Blue Jay, American Robin, Brown Thrasher). Greenlaw et al. demonstrated that multiple male EATOs gave heterospecific (mimicked) calls without substituting in their own (EATO) calls, and that they increased their frequency of heterospecific (mimicked) calling while agitated. Those observations are similar to what we observed with our SPTO, which was giving only the one (heterospecific) EATO-like call (i.e., not mixing in SPTO calls). Regardless of our bird’s history and experience with EATO prior to arriving in Louisiana, it was sharing the same scrubby thicket, when and where we found it, with at least one vocal EATO, and thus had social experience with EATO and their calls.

Greenlaw, JS et al. 1998. Call mimicry by Eastern Towhees and its significance in relation to auditory learning. *Wilson Bull.* 110: 431-434.

(To place Greenlaw et al. in broader context, their observations are important because they provide evidence that towhee alarm call repertoires may be influenced by learning. Conventional wisdom holds that calls are innate, not learned, in songbirds.)

23. Date: 01 Feb 2019 Time: 1200 CST

24. May the LBRC have permission to display this report or portions of this report on its website? Yes

If yes, may we include your name with the report? Yes

