

Green-tailed Towhee (GtT)

UNLIKE OUR YEAR-ROUND Canyon Towhee, the GtT is elusive and shy, spending much of its time in dense brush. The GtT is also a bit smaller (length 7.25 inches and wingspan 9.75 inches); it is the smallest towhee. Distinctive marks are greenish flight feathers and a rufous crown, with gray underneath. A close look also shows a distinctive white throat with a black line through the white. Males and females are similar; full coloration comes the year after hatching. According to the *Sibley Guide*, the GtT is here during the summer months. During winter, birds may go as far south as central Mexico. However, I spotted one outside my window in brush in the the spring. The *Bosque del Apache* guide lists the GtT as uncommon in spring and fall, occasional in winter. During summer, GtT is found as far north as Oregon.

Their breeding biology is not well known. Most likely, mating display by males consists of singing from prominent locations. Pairs are seasonally monogamous. A bulky nest of sticks and grass is usually built

near or on the ground. Days to hatch (12) and to fledge (11-14) are probably similar to other towhees. Both male and female feed the chicks, usually insects. Their diet changes to seeds as the season changes. When searching for food, a double scratch motion in ground litter is characteristic. The song resembles a Fox Sparrow's; GtTs are classified as New World Sparrows, preferring to stay on the ground, and do not form large flocks. When the nest is approached, the female runs away in a mouse-like manner, presumably to draw attention away from the nest. Young birds develop leg size and strength before acquiring all flight feathers, presumably so that the young can abandon their ground nest when predators approach.

INTERESTING SIGHTING: Beginning on August 15, 2009, an immature Blue-footed Booby has been seen at Conchas Lake State Park. These birds are often seen off southern California and Mexico, but never before in New Mexico!

—Pam Henline

