

Hard to Find - Easy to Identify

I HESITATED TO WRITE ABOUT THIS beautiful, secretive little bird that I don't see frequently. But after four sightings in one week (at the Community Center near the tennis courts and in my yard) I changed my mind. The Spotted Towhee (ST) is a year-round resident in Eldorado (although some birds migrate as far south as Guatemala, others move to lower elevations or to the Great Plains) but is difficult to spot, moving quickly and quietly through the underbrush, scratching for insects, berries and seeds. The ST wingspan is 10.5 inches, with a body length of 8.5 inches. Its head and neck are velvety black, the breast is bright robin-red with a small section of pale grey and its wings and tail are black with bright white spots on the wings. The eyes are red. Males and females look the same. Until 1995, this bird was grouped with the Eastern Rufous Towhee, which lacks the wing spots. The call is usually a few quick notes followed by a buzzy trill—*che che che zhee*. The geographic differences of voice and plumage are complex and poorly understood.

The female selects a nest site—a small depression

on the ground or low in a shrub that is lined with grasses, twigs and hair. The male courts by fluttering near the female, spreading his tail and wings. The female broods three to four eggs that hatch in 12 days. The helpless young are fed mostly by the male and fledge when 12 days old. Females occasionally feign injury to distract predators and may run through underbrush like a mouse. Some pairs produce a second brood 8 to 21 days after the first young fledge.

A strange characteristic of the ST is that its bill is shorter in winter than in summer. A reason for this difference may be that the ST eats more seeds in winter, also necessitating that they eat more grit. This winter eating pattern may grind down the bill, shortening it.

—Pam Herlihy

