



Photo By: Mike Yip  
vancouverislandbirds.com

## Townsend's Solitaire

**T**HE TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE (TS) is a drab member of the bluebird (thrush) family; it missed out on the beautiful blues that we love. Nevertheless, the TS is a handsome bird. At 8.5 inches long with a wingspan of 14.5 inches, it is slightly larger than our Western Bluebird. Male and female adults are similar—a drab gray, a bright white eye ring, small black bill and some light brown on outer wing feathers. A light brown stripe flashes on the under-wing when in flight. The tail shape is similar to that of mockingbird's and a white stripe can be seen on the sides of the tail when it is spread in flight. They have a pleasant, long trilling song.

TS is seen in open montane coniferous forests (that is closer to the Agora-Dos Griegos area) and moves to some lower elevations in winter. They can be seen in our area year round but are more common in winter, sometimes in flocks with Mountain Bluebirds. Some birds winter as far south as central Mexico. During the winter, the male and female are both strongly territorial, defending patches of

juniper trees against other solitaires. The TS sings throughout the fall and winter to set up and hold its winter territory.

My *Birds Handbook* by P. R. Ehrlich and others is surprisingly short on information about this species. Small cavity nests are built on the ground or in cut banks but brood information is undocumented (I'll guess it is similar to Western Bluebirds with eggs taking 12 days to hatch and 15 days for young to fledge). Their diet is fruit, insects and seeds from juniper, mountain ash, serviceberry, Texas Madrone and other trees and bushes. In winter, they prefer the juniper's ripe, fleshy berries.

Insects are gleaned off of vegetation from the ground or from short low flight. They sometimes hover briefly when plucking fruit. They are an important part of the ecosystem as long-distance seed dispensers.

I first saw this bird at the top of a large leafless tree at the Community Center while out with the monthly birding walk.

—Pam Henne