The Birder's Eye
The Shape of Waterthrushes

Lousisiana Waterthrush, Simon Thompson

For many winter-weary birders, the loud ringing song of the Louisiana Waterthrush is certainly music to our ears. With woods still dark and leafless, and perhaps some ice remaining on pools and river fringes, this active warbler is among the first to return after its winter sojourn in the tropics. The loud song is designed to be heard over the sound of the fast-flowing rivers where it prefers to nest. Despite the song, finding the bird can be frustrating as it often perches high above the river where its brown plumage makes it inconspicuous. A loud, somewhat buoyant call-note announces his departure as he flies down the river to feed. Louisiana Waterthrush breed on many of our rivers here in Western North Carolina with some of the best sites being along the Green River Cove in Polk County, the Davidson River from Pisgah Forest up to the Blue Ridge Parkway and along Bent Creek at the North Carolina Arboretum. Knowing the song is one of the most important things, as another cove forest species, the Swainson's Warbler, lives in the same habitat and can sound a little similar.

Northern Waterthrush, Alan Lenk

A close relative of the Louisiana Waterthrush is the Northern Waterthrush, a species that only passes through our region on its north and southbound migrations. A bog and slow-moving wetland species, the Northern nests throughout the Boreal zone from Alaska west to Newfoundland, with a very small population nesting as far south as the Cranberry Glades area of West Virginia. The chattering three-part song is quite different to that of the Louisiana, but the call notes are very difficult to distinguish. Northerns tend to arrive later in the spring, long after the Louisiana's are established on their breeding grounds and return later in the fall, several weeks after the Louisiana's have once again left for their wintering grounds.

It's usually only during spring migration (at some of the migration hotspots) when both species may occur together, and this is where identification can be a little tricky. Habitat helps most of the time as Louisianas tend to stick to faster-flowing rivers, while Northerns have a broader habitat preference and even occur during mangrove swamps during the winter. As for fieldmarks and distinguishing features, I tend to look at the broad white supercilium first; the Northern's

tends to graduate to a point and tends to be a pale-ish brown-cream in coloration, while the Louisiana's flares well past the eye and can be very white. The Northern is overall a buffier bird with shorter, less pink legs and a less extravagant bobbing habit. Ninety per cent of the time song and habitat can be the clue but knowing those distinguishing field marks will be essential on out-of-range individuals.

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