

NOTES

SPOTTED TOWHEE MIMICRY OF A BLUE JAY

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ABSTRACT: On 27 March 2024 I video- and audio-recorded a Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) mimicking the “jay” call of the Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) at Centennial, Colorado. Although the closely related Eastern Towhee (*P. erythrophthalmus*) has been noted imitating other birds a few times, the only previous report of the Spotted Towhee mimicking dates to the 19th century.

Avian vocal mimicry has been well studied globally with over 300 songbirds documented as mimics (Goller and Shizuka 2018). Mimicry in North America is limited to a relatively small number of species (<10% considered “flexible” mimics; see Goller and Shizuka 2018), notably within the families Mimidae (e.g., Northern Mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos*), Corvidae (e.g., Blue Jay, *Cyanocitta cristata*), plus the Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) and various other unrelated species such as the Lesser (*Spinus psaltria*) and Lawrence’s (*S. lawrencei*) Goldfinches. The Eastern (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) and Spotted (*P. maculatus*) towhees, formerly taxonomically lumped as the Rufous-sided Towhee (*P. erythrophthalmus*), are generally not thought of as mimics despite having diverse regional dialects and wide variation in song and call repertoires (Borror 1959, 1975, 1977). There is evidence of both towhee species mimicking other bird species, although Borror (1975) suggested that heterospecific songs and calls do not greatly influence song patterns in the Eastern Towhee. The Eastern Towhee has been documented mimicking the Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*), Blue Jay, Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*), and American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) on a limited number of occasions, with calls being incorporated into songs and call series with more typical Eastern Towhee vocalizations (Borror 1975, 1977, Greenlaw et al. 1998). In contrast, the Spotted Towhee has been reported mimicking another bird species only once: Cohen (1899) reported a single instance of a Spotted Towhee mimicking a California Scrub Jay (*Apelocoma californica*) in winter in Alameda, Alameda County, California.

On 27 March 2024, I observed a male Spotted Towhee mimicking a Blue Jay at Writers Vista Park in Centennial, Arapahoe County, Colorado (39.5730° N, 105.0131° W). I initially heard characteristic Blue Jay “jay” or “jeer” calls (Smith et al. 2020) and a Spotted Towhee making typical “mew” call notes (Bartos Smith and Greenlaw 2020) in the backyard of a home abutting the park. The jay call sounded slightly weaker than usual, but it was relatively loud and suggested the bird was close by. Upon investigation, I was unable to find a Blue Jay despite hearing loud, nearby calls, but I then observed a Spotted Towhee sitting on top of a shrub approximately 4 m away. The towhee was generally alternating “jay” calls with towhee “mew” calls and did not appear to be disturbed or responding to any activity or threat. I obtained audiovisual recordings of the Spotted Towhee making both jay and towhee calls with a hand-held iPhone 7 through Swarovski binoculars (8 × 42) and uploaded a 12-second segment to <https://ebird.org/checklist/S166200823>. I was unable to locate any towhees at the location on 3 April 2024 or on subsequent visits. Presumably, the male towhee moved through the area during the single encounter.

This observation represents only the second report and first audio and video documentation that the Spotted Towhee is capable of mimicking other bird species.

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Greenlaw et al. (1998) documented four Eastern Towhees incorporating towhee “mew” calls and Blue Jay “jeer” calls into both song and call repertoires and using those calls in various contexts (e.g., mobbing, singing). Although I do not know whether the towhee I recorded was a winter visitant or resident, the Blue Jay is regular at the site and in the greater Denver metropolitan area, so there was potential for a towhee’s repeated exposure to the jay’s vocalizations.

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