

Denizen of the high peaks gets status review

Bicknell's Thrush could be classified as endangered

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MOUNTAINTOP — Greene County's Mountaintop region is famous for the wilderness that drew the famed artists of the Hudson River School of Painting there, and which they captured on their canvases for posterity.

Equally distinctive to the region, but far less well known, is a small olive-brown bird that would have flitted about their high-elevation campsites in the early mornings, a true denizen of the Catskill High peaks, whose attraction for wilderness was equal to theirs.

That bird was, in fact, so unobtrusive in its hidden mountaintop recesses that it was only in 1881 — more than half a century after Thomas Cole first wandered those woods — that it was recognized, literally, as a bird of its own.

And although the discoverer, Eugene Bicknell, made his realization on the top of Slide Mountain, the thrush that now bears his name, Bicknell's Thrush, is equally at home atop Hunter and the crests of Greene County's highest other peaks and remains there today.

The question, however, is — without federal assistance — will it?

The Catskills are the southernmost area where Bicknell's Thrush can be found, and it is not a common bird anywhere in its full region, the highest upper peaks of Quebec and the Canadian Maritimes, and south through those of New England and the Adirondacks.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has accordingly issued what is called a 90-day finding, which includes conducting a 60-day collection of information on the bird, to see if it should be listed as endangered or threatened.

Whatever its determination, the agency will subsequently issue that finding for a 12-month window, apparently to see how its application works and/or receive comment on it.

The whole Bicknell's Thrush review process was actually started two years ago by the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, which filed a petition with the wildlife service in the summer of 2010, requesting the bird be listed as either endangered or threatened, and that critical habitat for it be designated, pursuant to the Endangered Species Act.

That effort has been slowly making its way through the required procedural steps, and the wildlife service's ongoing 60-day data collection window is the initiation of the substantive part of it.

The information they are seeking is from those who may have first-hand, verifiable experience or knowledge about the bird, such as regular observations, notes on its nesting locations and habits, or problems it may face.

Many times, the professional scientific world is augmented by the work of dedicated amateurs, and whether the submittal is from a professional or amateur, if it can help broaden the knowledge base of Bicknell's Thrush, it may be of value and should be submitted.

The agency is not, however, at this time looking for general feedback on the idea of giving it a federal listing, as that will ostensibly come later in the process if it is listed.

“Submissions merely stating support for or opposition to the action under consideration — without providing supporting information — although noted, will not be considered in making a determination,” states the 90-day finding.

Some of the subject areas they list as wanting information include habitat requirements for feeding, breeding, and sheltering; distribution patterns; population levels; and impacts from climate change, wind and telecommunication projects, or mercury accumulation.

Birding is like any other hobby. Those who are aficionados are knowledgeable in their subject of interest, and the rest of the world pays little mind to it.

In the world of birding, however, Bicknell’s Thrush is not your everyday bird.

It is an avian identify of the Catskills, and carries with it scientific, economic, and recreational opportunities.

As a bird that was only given full species recognition in the late 20th century — it used to be classified as a subspecies of another thrush — it is a pretty distinctive addition to a birder’s “life list” — the running list kept on species seen, year in, year out.

Because of their remote habitat and elusive habits, Bicknell’s Thrush is, perhaps, not easily spotted, but they are truly a locally unique creature that brings a special and uncommon flavor to the biological mix of Greene County and the Catskills.

For the full text of the wildlife service’s 90-day finding, including submittal directions, visit the website of the service’s New England Field Office at www.fws.gov/newengland/index.htm and follow the links for Bicknell’s “News Release” and its embedded 90-day finding.

All relevant information must be received at the agency by Oct. 15, 2012.