

About the Cover Photo

by *Kevin T. Karlson*

On 4 November 2006, an unprecedented flight of **Hermit Thrushes**, along with other late-season songbirds, occurred along the mid-Atlantic coast. If I recall correctly, Paul Lehman estimated 700+ Hermit Thrushes in Cape May, New Jersey, alone. Our yard in Cape May Court House (11 miles north of Cape May Point) had a dozen or so feeding right on our lawn, amid hundreds of sparrows and Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers. Many of the Hermit Thrushes gave their distinctive call notes from the woodland fringe. These special migratory moments are the main reason we moved to the Cape May area twenty years ago, and seeing this type of mass movement of birds will always strongly touch my deepest feelings for birding and nature.

I got down on my knees to photograph these tame birds and frequently had to back up to fit them in the frame. Hermit Thrushes are typically not this easily approached, but sheer numbers combined with a strong desire to find food resulted in this special photographic opportunity. Perhaps the normal migratory, open-lawn-feeding behavior of the Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers gave the Hermit Thrushes the confidence to stray from their preferred woodland and thicket habitats. Beautiful autumn colors from fallen leaves make the background of the photo all the more appealing.

I purposely tried to capture the tail-raising-and-wing-drooping behavior that Hermit Thrushes exhibit while feeding. After taking several steps, they stop abruptly, then raise their tail, then droop their wings, and then sometimes make soft clucking notes. This behavior is unique to the Hermit among North American thrushes, and it is one that is repeated periodically when Hermits are feeding in open areas. These actions convey a very noticeable body language, and other bird species exhibit similarly diagnostic behavioral characteristics that attract the notice of the vigilant observer. Again, I recommend that you spend a substantial amount of time observing birds *after* you have identified them.



Spend Some Quality Time Birding

One more time: It is important to study birds and their physical movements for longer time periods than most birders are accustomed to. In a world of fast food and increasingly hurried pace, birding can be an activity that allows us to relax and concentrate on more than just a quick identification. By allowing and encouraging right brain activity to form visual pictures of a bird's size, shape, structure, and body language, we are creating lasting impressions that will be useful when these species are seen again.

After identifying a bird, spend some extra time absorbing the subtle movements and body language of several individuals of that species. You might think that you know this bird well since you correctly identified it, but there are numerous subtle field characters and aspects of body language that will add to and reinforce your overall impression of the species. After years of consciously studying a species with the intent of becoming intimately familiar with its shape and movements, we often notice additional nuances in behavior or body language that further reinforce our personal impressions.

Photographic Details

The Hermit Thrush cover photo by Kevin T. Karlson was taken with a Canon 600mm L-series lens, a Canon Mark II N digital camera body and a 1.4 teleconverter, and no flash. This photo was shot at 400 ISO, with a shutter speed of 1,250th of a second at F-9. All of the photos in the article (pp. 56–63) were also taken with this equipment, but some did not include the teleconverter, and others were taken with a Canon Mark II camera.