

Species Status Assessment

Common Name: Swainson's Thrush **Date Updated:** 2024-12-20
Scientific Name: *Catharus ustulatus* **Updated By:** Tgh, V Bonaiuto
Class: Aves
Family: Turdidae

Species Synopsis

(a short paragraph which describes species taxonomy, distribution, recent trends, and habitat in New York):

Swainson's thrush is a migratory bird that occurs in a wide range from Northern Alaska through Canada, the United States, and into South America. This species breeds in Canada and some mountainous regions of the Pacific West and Northeast of the United States. In Northeastern United States this species breeding habitats consists of predominantly hardwood forests (NatureServe 2025). This species winters primarily in South America.

Although considered to be a very common species, slow declines have been observed in the last few decades, although no clear cause is known (Mack and Yong 2020). Habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation pose a major threat to populations.

In New York, this species nests at high elevation forests in the Adirondack and Catskills mountains. It also breeds in Tug Hill, Chenango County, and the Allegany Hills (Mack and Yong 2020).

I. Status

a. Current legal protected Status

i. **Federal:** Not listed

Candidate:

ii. **New York:** Not listed: protected native

b. Natural Heritage Program

i. **Global:** G5

ii. **New York:** S5B

Tracked by NYNHP?

Other Ranks:

New York 2025 SGCN status: Species of Greatest Conservation Need
COSEWIC: Not listed in Canada

IUCN Red List: Least Concern
 Northeast Regional SGCN: Not listed

Status Discussion:

Swainson’s thrush is a widespread species with a large population size. It is globally ranked as secure, and many northeast states list this species as Secure (S5) or Apparently Secure (S4). The exceptions being Pennsylvania ranking the species as Vulnerable (S3) and New Jersey as Imperiled (S2). There is no status rank for this species in Connecticut, Rhode Island, or Delaware, and it is ranked as possibly extirpated in Maryland.

II. Abundance and Distribution Trends

| Region | Present? | Abundance | Distribution | Time Frame | Listing status or S-Rank | SGCN? |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|--------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|
| North America | Yes | Declining | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 trend for US | | |
| Northeastern US | Yes | Unknown | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend | | |
| New York | Yes | Declining | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 trend | | Yes |
| Connecticut | Yes | Unknown | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend | SNA | |
| Massachusetts | Yes | Unknown | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend | S2B,S5N | |
| New Jersey | Yes | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | S4N | |
| Pennsylvania | Yes | Unknown | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend | S3B,S4M | Yes |
| Vermont | Yes | Declining | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 trend | S4B | |
| Ontario | Yes | Declining | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 trend | S5B | |

| Region | Present? | Abundance | Distribution | Time Frame | Listing status or S-Rank | SGCN? |
|--------|----------|-----------|--------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------|
| Quebec | Yes | Declining | Unknown | BBS 1966-2022 trend | S5B | |

Column options

Present?: Yes; No; Unknown; No data; (blank) or Choose an Item

Abundance and Distribution: Declining; Increasing; Stable; Unknown; Extirpated; N/A; (blank) or Choose an item

SGCN?: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item

Monitoring in New York

(specify any monitoring activities or regular surveys that are conducted in New York):

Trends Discussion

Long-term, Swainson's thrush has experienced a slow decline in population across its range based on Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data (NatureServe 2025). The short-term trend for Swainson's thrush is relatively stable in the United States, with a more significant decline in Canada (NatureServe 2025).

(insert map of North American/regional distribution and status):

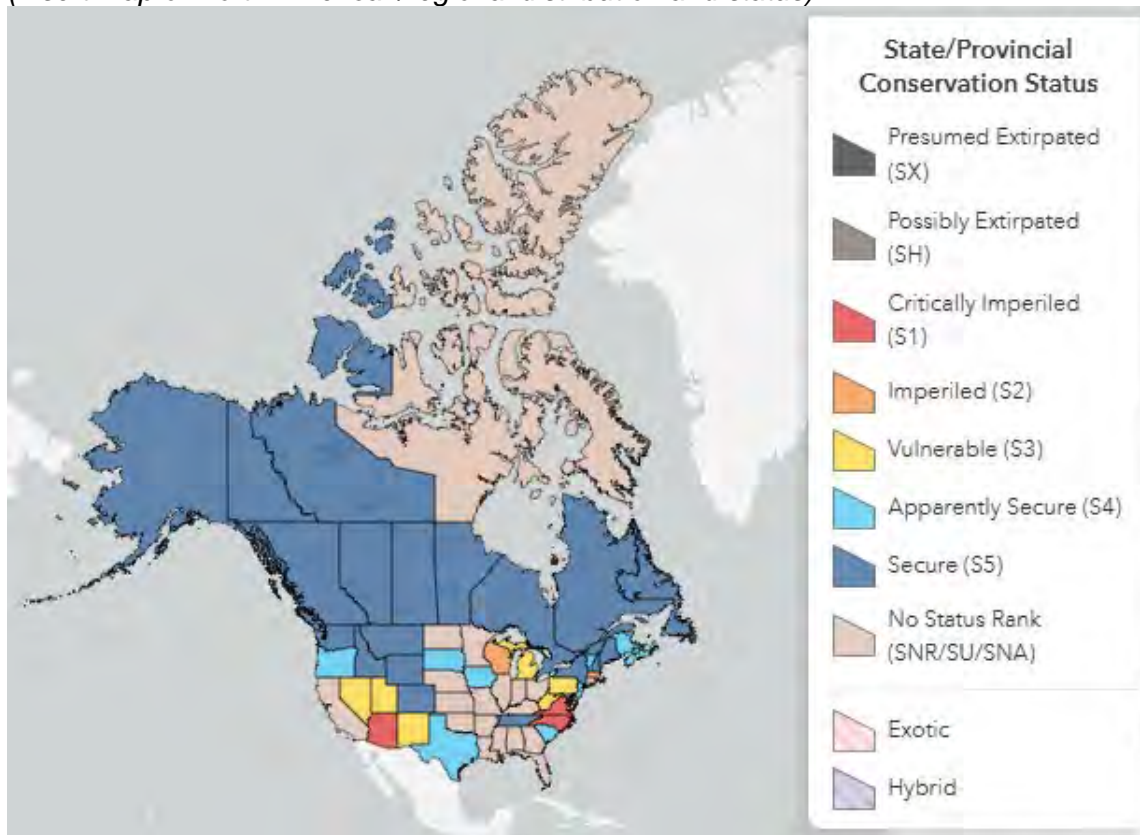


Figure 1. Conservation status of Swainson's thrush in North America (NatureServe 2025).

Breeding range map for Swainson's Thrush

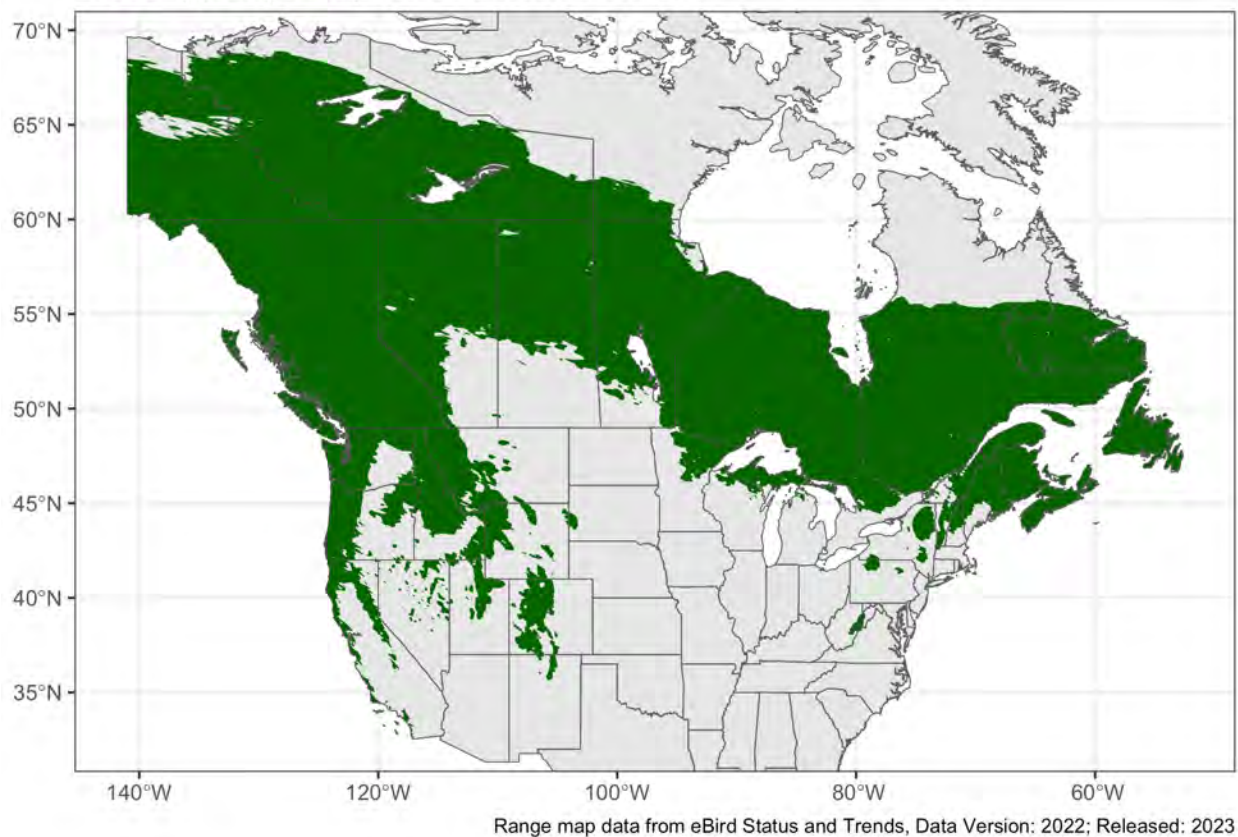
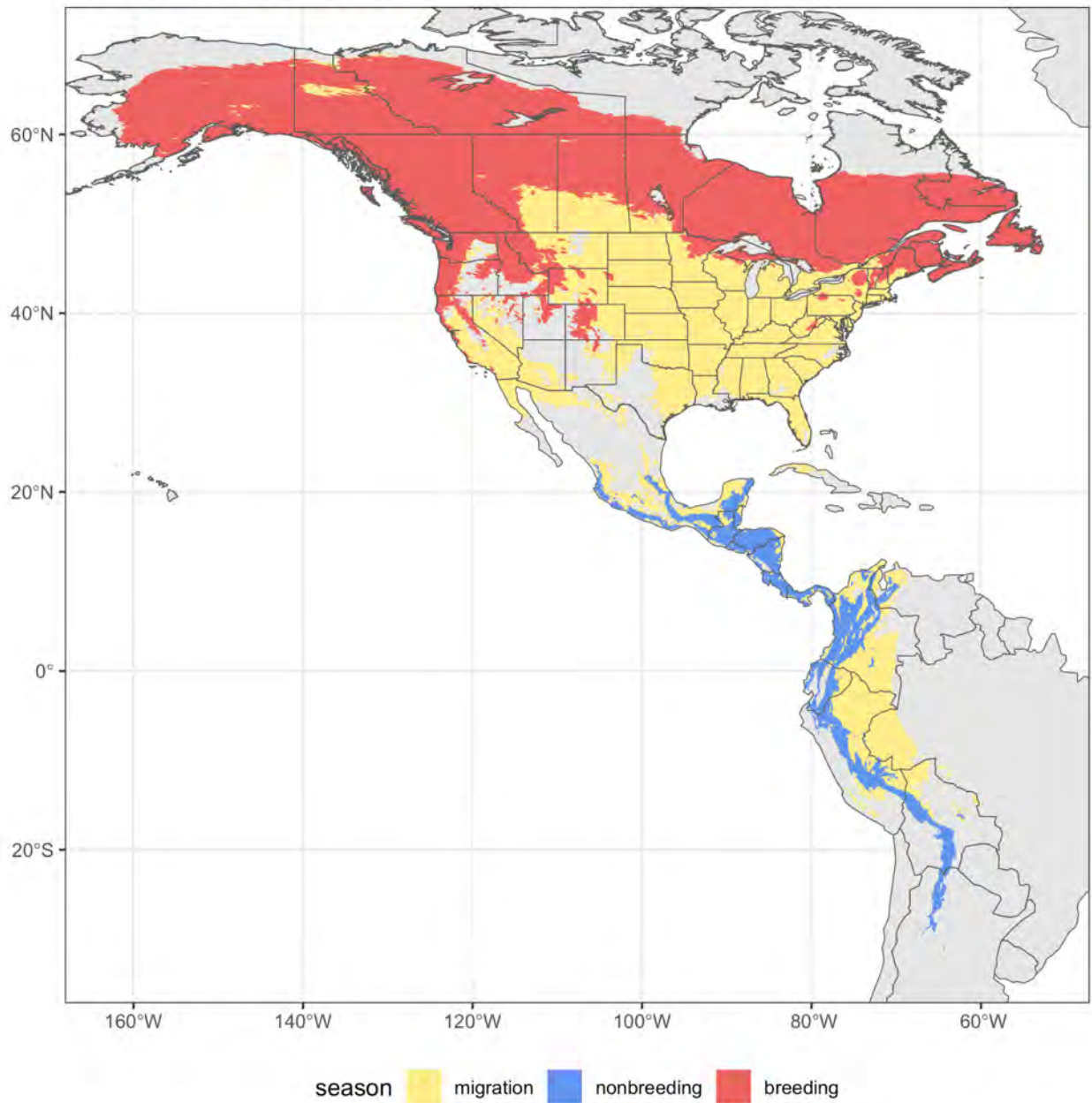


Figure 2. Breeding range for Swainson's thrush (eBird).

Year-round range map for Swainson's Thrush



Range map data from eBird Status and Trends, Data Version: 2022; Released: 2023

Figure 3. Full (year-round) range for Swainson's thrush (eBird).

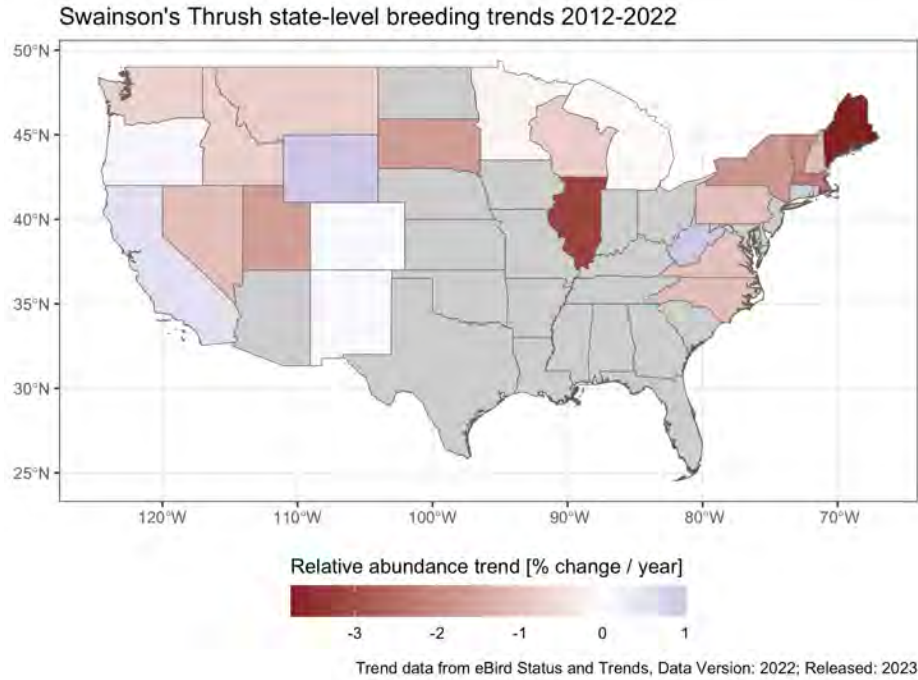


Figure 4. Breeding trends, by state, for Swainson’s thrush (eBird).

III. New York Rarity

(provide map, numbers, and percent of state occupied)

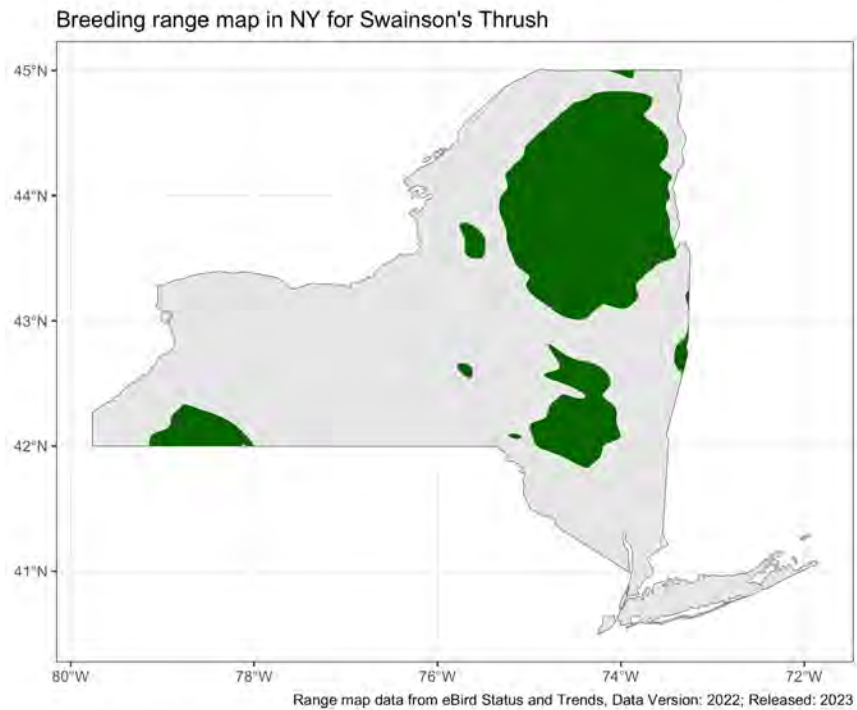


Figure 5. NYS breeding range for Swainson’s thrush based on eBird data.

Details of historic and current occurrence:

The first Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) (1980-85) documented occupancy in 704 blocks, 13.2% of the survey blocks statewide (Andrle and Carroll 1988). The second BBA (2000-05) documented occupancy in 589 blocks, 11% of the survey blocks statewide (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

The third BBA (2020-25) is currently underway and utilizes a different number and layout of survey blocks across New York, making direct comparison with the first two Atlases difficult. There were 5,333 blocks in the first and second BBAs, and there are 5,710 blocks in the current BBA, of which 1,815 are considered priority blocks. To date, Swainson’s thrush has been documented in 494 priority blocks, 12.4% of all priority blocks statewide during the third BBA (NY BBA III Overview, 2024).

New York’s Contribution to Species North American Range:

Based on eBird data, 0.12 percent of the population breeds in New York, while 0 percent of the non-breeding population occurs in New York. Among all states with breeding populations, New York ranks 11 of 20.

| Percent of North American Range in NY | Classification of NY Range | Distance to core population, if not in NY |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 1-25% | | |

Column options

Percent of North American Range in NY: 100% (endemic); 76-99%; 51-75%; 26-50% 1-25%; 0%; Choose an item

Classification of NY Range: Core; Peripheral; Disjunct; (blank) or Choose an item

IV. Primary Habitat or Community Type

(from NY crosswalk of NE Aquatic, Marine, or Terrestrial Habitat Classification Systems):

NatureServe broad habitat types: Forest/Woodland, Forest - Hardwood, Woodland - Hardwood, Forest - Mixed, Woodland - Mixed, Shrubland/chaparral, Woodland - Conifer, Forest - Conifer, Riparian, FORESTED WETLAND

Habitat or Community Type Trend in New York

| Habitat Specialist? | Indicator Species? | Habitat/ Community Trend | Time frame of Decline/ Increase |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown |

Column options

Habitat Specialist and Indicator Species: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item.

Habitat/Community Trend: Declining; Stable; Increasing; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item.

Habitat Discussion:

In the Adirondacks and Catskills, Swainson’s thrush nests primarily below elevation used by Gray-cheeked and above those used by Hermit Thrush, but some overlap. At high elevation spruce-fir preferred, at low elevation beech-maple is preferred. Of 17 NY nests, 10 in hemlocks, 7 in spruce-fir.

Breeding habitat includes dense vegetation in coniferous forests, mixed hardwood-conifer forests (e.g., across Canada and northern New England, predominantly hardwood forests (e.g., in Northeast), riparian woodland and thickets of willow or alder (e.g., California and other western states at south end of range), aspen forests (e.g. southwest part of range), and sometimes coastal scrub (California) (Mack and Yong 2000). Depending on the location, this species may be associated with young, mature, or old growth (see Mack and Wong 2000). Range-wide, nesting occurs at elevations from sea level to 2,600 meters or higher. Nests usually are in small trees, close to the trunk, often 2 meters or less above ground; often in conifers, sometimes deciduous trees or shrubs (e.g., willow). During migration, this species uses a wide range of wooded and shrubby habitats, generally with thick undergrowth. During the boreal winter, Swainson’s thrushes inhabit a wide range of conditions that may vary with region, including primary forest, mature selva forest, tropical semideciduous forest, humid to semi humid evergreen and semideciduous forest (including pine-oak, coniferous, tropical deciduous, and cloud forest), secondary growth, and forest-pasture edges, and human-made openings with ornamental shrubs (see Mack and Yong 2000).

V. Species Demographics and Life History

| Breeder in NY? | Non-breeder in NY? | Migratory Only? | Summer Resident? | Winter Resident? | Anadromous/Catadromous? |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No |

Column options

First 5 fields: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item.

Anadromous/Catadromous: Anadromous; Catadromous; (blank) or Choose an item.

Species Demographics and Life History Discussion

(include information about species life span, reproductive longevity, reproductive capacity, age to maturity, and ability to disperse and colonize):

Eggs are first laid between April and June, and generally Swainson’s thrush only broods once per season (Mack and Yong 2020). Clutch size ranges from 1-5 eggs, with 4 being the most common clutch size (Mack and Yong 2020). Incubation lasts 10-14 days. Occasionally, brood parasitism occurs between Swainson’s thrush and brown-headed cowbirds.

During nonbreeding season Swainson’s thrush are solitary or in loose flocks in migration (Stiles and Skutch 1989, Rappole and Warner 1980).

VI. Threats

| Threat Level 1 | Threat Level 2 | Threat Level 3 | Spatial Extent | Severity | Immediacy | Trend | Certainty |
|---|---|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Residential and Commercial | 1.1 Housing & Urban Areas | Choose an item. (habitat loss) | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. |
| 4. Transportation & Service Corridors | 4.2 Utility & Service Lines | 4.2.1 Power & service lines (collisions) | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. |
| 8. Invasive & Other Problematic Species | 8.2 Problematic Native Plants & Animals | Choose an item. (cowbird parasitism) | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. | Choose an item. |

Table 1. Threats to Swainson's thrush

Habitat loss/degradation is a major threat to Swainson’s thrush. Logging activities reduce available habitat. Brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds, increased by grazing of habitats, threatens survival of Swainson’s thrush fledglings. Collisions with service towers and buildings can occur during migration (Mack and Yong 2020).

Are there regulatory mechanisms that protect the species or its habitat in New York?

Yes: ✓ **No:** **Unknown:**

If yes, describe mechanism and whether adequate to protect species/habitat:

This species is included in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (16 U.S.C. 703-712) and is protected as a native species under the NYS Environmental Conservation Law.

Describe knowledge of management/conservation actions that are needed for recovery/conservation, or to eliminate, minimize, or compensate for the identified threats:

| Action Category | Action | Description |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| A.1 Direct Habitat Management | A.1.0.0.0 Direct Habitat Management | Site/Area management |
| C.6 Design and Plan Conservation | C.6.5.0.0 Conservation Planning | Site/Area protection Resource/Habitat protection |

Table 2. Recommended conservation actions for *Swainson’s thrush*.

VII. References

This SSA drew heavily from these resources:

eBird. 2024. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. [Accessed: 11/25/2024].

Ziolkowski Jr., D.J., Lutmerding, M., English, W.B., and Hudson, M-A.R., 2024, North American Breeding Bird Survey Dataset 1966 - 2023: U.S. Geological Survey data release, <https://doi.org/10.5066/P136CRBV>.

New York Natural Heritage Program, State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. 2024. Element Occurrence and Element Dataset. Albany, New York. [Exported 11/20/2024].

NatureServe. 2024. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.1. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>. [Accessed 11/20/2024].

Additional references:

American Ornithologists' Union (AOU). 1983. Check-list of North American Birds, 6th edition. Allen Press, Inc., Lawrence, Kansas. 877 pp.

Bent, A. C. 1949. Life histories of North American thrushes, kinglets, and their allies. U. S. Nat. Mus. Bull.196. 452 pp., 51 pls.

Bull, John. 1974. Birds of New York State. Doubleday, Garden City, New York. 655 pp.

Harrison, C. 1978. A Field Guide to the Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of North American Birds. Collins, Cleveland, Ohio.

Harrison, H. H. 1979. A field guide to western birds' nests. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. 279 pp.

Hilty, S.L. and W. L. Brown. 1986. A Guide to the Birds of Colombia. Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA. 836 pp.

Keast, A., and E.S. Morton. 1980. Migrant birds in the neotropics: ecology, distribution, and conservation. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.

Mack, D. E. and W. Yong (2020). Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.swathr.01>

NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer. Page last published 1/31/25. https://explorer.natureserve.org/Taxon/ELEMENT_GLOBAL.2.100960/Catharus_ustulatus. Accessed February 20, 2025.

New York State Breeding Bird Atlas. 1984. Preliminary species distribution maps, 1980-1984. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Wildlife Resources Center. Delmar, NY.

New York State Breeding Bird Atlas. 1985. Final breeding bird distribution maps, 1980-1985. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Wildlife Resources Center. Delmar, NY.

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Checklist of the amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals of New York State, including their protective status. Nongame Unit, Wildlife Resources Center, Delmar, NY.

Rappole, J. H., and D. W. Warner. 1980. Ecological aspects of migrant bird behavior in Veracruz, Mexico. Pages 353-393 in A. Keast and E.S. Morton, editors. Migrant birds in the neotropics: ecology, distribution, and conservation. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.

Ridgely, R. S. and G. Tudor. 1989. The birds of South America. Volume 1. University of Texas Press, Austin, USA. 516 pp.

Stiles, F. G. and A. F. Skutch. 1989. A guide to the birds of Costa Rica. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, USA. 511 pp.

Terres, J. K. 1980. The Audubon Society encyclopedia of North American birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.