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VARIED THRUSH OR ALASKA ROBIN

Along the Pacific Coast, especially during the winter months, we have inquiries about a strange bird that looks and acts like a Robin but has a different dress. Instead of a brick-red breast, it has one of bright rusty brown, almost orange, with a band of black across its chest and a bluish or slate-colored back. This is the Varied Thrush, sometimes called Alaska or Oregon Robin.

When John Burroughs was on the Harriman Expedition in Alaska in 1899, he saw this strange Robin for the first time. At that time in Kadiak, he wrote a poem to it which begins:

"O varied thrush! O robin strange!
Behold my mute surprise,
Thy form and flight I long have known,
But not this new disguise."

The long drizzling rains and heavy fogs of the Pacific Northwest are needed to nourish the great forests of spruce, fir and cedar. The Varied Thrush likes the fog and rain. He lives in our northern climate and the high altitudes as a Hummingbird lives in the sun. Perhaps this thrush would never leave the dripping foliage and his haunts where the sun's rays seldom come if insect life did not fail him. But the heavy winter snows in the northern mountains drive him to the lower valleys and on into the mild California climate.

On a Fall morning when the fog is drifting through the tops of the tall firs, one may hear weird call notes sifting through the mist and yet not see a single bird. The notes, sometimes in a minor key, are drawn out, resonant and penetrating. Burroughs says that this song of the Varied Thrush is a "long tapering whistle with a sort of burr in it." One might think from its note that all life was full of pathos. This song, to be sure, is not rollicking and

explorations of Lewis and Clarke. In his diary written on the trip, Lewis records seeing a black woodpecker at a place about twelve miles east of the present site of Helena, Montana, on July 20, 1805. This is the first known record of the bird. Lewis wrote that he was unable to get a specimen at that time, but the following year on the homeward journey he secured some of them near the base of the Bitter Root Mountains in Idaho, from which the bird was later described and named.

Alexander Wilson, the pioneer of American ornithology, made a colored drawing of this woodpecker from these skins. Writing at that time, he said: "It was the request and particular wish of Captain Lewis, made to me in person, that I should make drawings of such of the feathered tribes as had been preserved and were new." It is fitting, therefore, that this bird was named in honor of Captain Lewis who discovered it. Lewis died in the prime of his life and was laid away in a solitary grave in the wilderness.