

The Outside Story

The Dapper Sparrow of the Underbrush: Eastern Towhee

By Colby Galliher

From forest edges and thickets on late spring mornings in the Northeast comes what sounds like an exhortation from across the pond: *drink-your-tea!* This is not a British parent's plea, but rather the song of a chunky, colorful sparrow: the eastern towhee.



The eastern towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*, or “red-eyed chipper”) is found in much of the eastern United States. The species belongs to the New World sparrow family, a group native to the Americas that tend to feed on the ground. While towhees spend the winter in the southern United States, they return to the Upper Valley, which lies along the northern edge of their breeding range, in April, and stay until September or early October.

Towhees sport handsome plumage reminiscent of a flashy American robin. The male has a jet-black head and back and a black-and-white tail, contrasted by healthy blushes of orange along his sides and a prominent white breast and stomach. The female is nearly identical save for the swapping of brown feathers for the male's black ones. As suggested by their scientific name, both sexes have striking red eyes.

Towhees tend to stick to the underbrush. They prefer shrubby, overgrown environments where they can forage concealed from predators. In these areas, they scratch at the ground, pushing leaves out of the way with a backward kick of both feet and a jump, and then feast on unearthed spiders, centipedes, and other invertebrates. This dance for dinner can be loud enough for the quiet ambler to detect before he or she hears the towhee's harsh *chewink* call rasping out from dense thickets. During the breeding season, males will occasionally climb up into shrubs or low tree branches, where they declare their territories via their *drink-your-tea!* song.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the eastern towhee and the spotted towhee – a species found in western North America – were thought to be the same bird, the rufous-sided towhee, until 1995. The two towhee species known today likely emerged during the last Ice Age, when massive ice sheets cleaved North America down the middle and split the rufous-sided towhee into eastern and western populations. These isolated populations, navigating different environments over thousands of years, eventually became distinct species.

Recent human-induced changes to the landscape have proven detrimental to the eastern towhee. The species benefitted from the widespread abandonment of farms in the Northeast in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which resulted in former agricultural lands overgrowing with the thickets and shrubs towhees prefer. But continued succession of shrublands into forest, as well as development of open areas, has shrunk the species' available habitat.

Towhee nests are also subjected to parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds, which lay their eggs in the nests of towhees and other songbirds. Towhees exhibit little to no ability to distinguish these eggs – and the cowbird chicks they hatch into – from their own, leading to reduced survival for towhee chicks. Finally, because towhees nest on the ground, they are vulnerable in the breeding season to disturbance by off-leash dogs, as well as to predation by cats.

The 2025 “State of the Birds” report indicates that the eastern towhee is one of 112 “Tipping Point” species whose populations have dwindled by more than 50 percent in the last 50 years. Similarly, the second Vermont Atlas of Life, published in the mid-2000s, estimated a 53 percent contraction in the state's eastern towhee numbers. New Hampshire Audubon reports precipitous declines as well.

Still, there are ways to help towhees in your own backyard. Consider taking a passive approach to leaf litter and other “messy” areas, especially forest edges and shrubby zones, and avoid treating lawns or gardens with pesticides that can poison birds and their insect prey. Leaving these areas as they are provides towhees with plenty of cover and forage while benefitting other ground-dwelling species and insect populations. Towhees also feed on the ground under bird feeders, assuming that feeders are near enough to cover for a quick escape.

With migratory birds back for the spring and summer, listen for *chewink* calls and the scrape of busy feet in thickets, and for that insistent *drink-your-tea* song from mid-story perches. Even if you catch just a flash of white as an eastern towhee darts away from you, you will have glimpsed one of the Northeast's most dazzling and increasingly rare sparrows.

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