Bird:  SPOTTED TOWHEE, probably first-year female of Great Plains race *arcticus*

Observers:  Tim Spahr (finder), Wayne Petersen, Mary Pinard

Date:   3 January 2015, around 1:55 PM

Location:  Lake Road, Squibnocket area, Martha's Vineyard

Conditions:  overcast, no precipitation, 8-kt NE wind, around 40 deg F

Optics:  Swarovski 10X42 (not sure Wayne's bins), photos taken with trusty Nikon D7000 and Sigma 120-400 IS lens.  Sounds recorded with Olympus LS-10S voice recorder.

Narrative:

While enjoying the Martha's Vineyard CBC, kicking around a bunch of largely private communities we'd never make it into in high season, and running really late after chasing a fake King Eider I'd misidentified from over 1000 yards away, and then finally failing to locate a really good thicket from years past, we came upon a nice-looking thicket on Lake Road about 200 yards from State Road in the Squibnocket area of Chilmark, very near Aquinnah.    Wayne suggested we stop and see what we could find.  I plunked down the diabolical screech owl scold tape and we began to pish and draw in birds.  Rather quickly we get our only Red-breasted Nuthatch of the day.  While Wayne was showing this bird to Mary, I continued to pish and noted some birds coming in from the south.  Eventually I squeaked up a towhee and a couple of White-throated Sparrows.  Curiously, the towhee showed a rather sooty hood, definitely not black and not warm brown.  While I was processing the confusion, the bird turned and showed the heavily streaked and spotted back and strong wing bars, and even more of that odd slaty-gray hood.  By this time I started yelling "SPOTTED TOWHEE!!!! SPOTTED TOWHEE!!!" to make sure I got Wayne and Mary's attention.  Probably not the slickest thing I've done.  By this time the bird had moved deeper into the thicket to the east.  Wayne rather smartly suggested walking around behind the bird and seeing if he could flush it toward me.  It worked.  The bird flew across the bowl of the thicket, a bit to my north.  At this point I called Jeremiah, hoping he could come and help secure photos.  After a tense few minutes, with the bird sneaking and skulking just out of photography range in a dense thicket, it finally appeared near my position while Wayne was whistling Screech Owl calls and I secured the photos presented below.  All the while the bird was giving a strange mewing version of the flight note that was recorded twice.  It is worth noting that without seeing the wings clearly at first, I'd called Jeremiah and let him know I was not sure the bird was not a hybrid.  After I got photos, I sent these along via text to see if we could settle the issue on the spot, and I believe we did.

description:

--significantly larger than the White-throated Sparrows it was with

--long black tail with much white in the edges and as seen from both top and bottom

--sooty gray hood, too light for any male towhee and much too gray for a female Eastern

--prominent numerous white spots/streaks in the center of the back, and on the scapulars and also strong wing bars

--some brown tones in the crown and among the streaks in the back, noted only in photographs

--strong rust-color on the sides (rufous-sided)

--robust short dark conical bill, showing lighter color on the lower mandible

--brownish iris, definitely not bright red

To rule out Eastern Towhee, or hybrids, there needs to be no discernible white at the primary bases.  Nothing was noted in the field, but understanding this can be difficult to see, I needed to get diagnostic photos.  These are also presented below.  No white checkmark is seen, and there is minimal white along the edges of the primaries.  I would expect hybrid birds to show more white or less spots on the back and less prominent wing bars.

Based on the density of spots and streaks on the back and wings, and the sooty gray hood, and the dull iris, I presume this is a first-year female of the *arcticus* race.

In addition to photos, two recordings of call notes were made.  They appear to be lisping versions of the flight note, but one has a substantial "mewing" component that may or not be diagnostic.  I note Xeno-Canto recordings of this note from Ian Cruickshank, but of a Pacific-coast bird:

<http://www.xeno-canto.org/159504>