Abert’s Towhee
Melospiza aberti

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Recent analysis of mitochondrial genes suggests that the presently recognized brown towhees—California, Abert’s, Canyon, and White-throated—are more closely related to the ground-sparrows than they are to the predominantly black or green towhees. As a result, “brown towhees” are now placed in the genus Melospiza. See the Bird Supplement to the AOU Checklist of North American Birds for details. Future revisions of this account will reflect these changes.

Abert’s Towhee inhabits dense brush and accessible Sonoran Desert rivers and streams in Arizona and surrounding states. Spencer Baird described this species in 1832 (American Ornithologists’ Union 1832) and named it for Lt. James William Abert, U.S. Army (1820–1897), who obtained the specimen as a result of a survey of New Mexico at the end of the Mexican War. Abert was a West Point graduate, served in the Topographical Engineers and retired from the Army after the Civil War with the rank of Lt. Colonel (Abert 1852). Because this nonmigratory towhee spends most of its life on a permanent territory covered by dense shrubs, it is thought to be secretive and is often detected by its call notes. In interactions with other birds, however, it is bold and aggressive and where it finds suitable habitat in suburban environments it is often obnoxious of human.

Unlike the song of Spotted Towhee (P. affinis), the song of this towhee is rarely heard. The species’ most characteristic vocalization is the squared call given simultaneously by both sexes upon reunion—a call used most often during the long breeding season to promote and maintain a close pair bond. This close and prolonged pair bond allows Abert’s Towhee to initiate nesting rapidly in response to changes in weather or food supply, to minimize the nesting period, and to renest quickly after nest failure in an environment where rates of predation and parasitism are high.

Abert’s Towhee has heavy legs typical of a ground forager, and it spends almost all of its nonbreeding season scratching for insects and seeds or perching in low shrubs or tree branches. Its flights, which account for less than 5% of its daylight hours, are short and low, usually to perch sites, including wall tops in suburban vegetation.

After an extended period of dry weather, rain during the breeding season can result in a flood of insects and seeds, which can produce a peak in nesting activity within two weeks. The extended breeding season and tight pair bond enable some Abert’s Towhees to produce two broods given simultaneously by both sexes upon reunion—a call used most often during the long breeding season to promote and maintain a close pair bond. This close and prolonged pair bond allows Abert’s Towhee to initiate nesting rapidly in response to changes in weather or food supply, to minimize the nesting period, and to renest quickly after nest failure in an environment where rates of predation and parasitism are high.

The preferred streamside habitat of Abert’s Towhee—the brushy understory of willow (Salix spp.) gallery forests and torenios—has been cleared and otherwise altered by grazing. Although this towhee has adapted to some urban and shrubland habitats, these do not equal the extent of habitat lost. This species occupies suitable riparian habitat below 1,300 m within the shaded area. This species is essentially sedentary year-round.

Figure 1. Geographic range of Abert’s Towhee.

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