

### Personal Camouflage, Next Time Be A Tree

By Greg Clark

In the spring of 1997 I was doing breeding bird survey work in Yuma County in Arizona. As part of the survey work, I also tried to make recordings of any new species encountered that I hadn't recorded in the past. This was when I first heard the song for LeConte's Thrasher. A low desert thrasher, adapted to the hottest and driest parts of Arizona, it is an uncommon bird throughout its range, favoring areas with low, sparse vegetation. I was excited at the opportunity to make my first recording. Using a Sennheiser MKH-70 shotgun microphone, I was easily able to hear the bird, but much too far away to make a good recording. I began to pursue the bird as I would any thrasher in Sonoran desert habitat. Typically, it is possible to approach Curve-billed Thrasher, Bendire's Thrasher, and Crissal Thrasher without expending too much time. I have recorded these three species by using trees and bushes to cover my approach. These thrashers are approachable when they are intent on singing from the tops of trees such as palo verde, mesquite, or ironwood. Sometimes they also sing from saguaro cactus. Crissal Thrasher is renowned for staying hidden from sight, but even this bird will perch in plain view when advertising or defending its territory. Thus, I was very surprised when I tried to use the available cover to close the distance on LeConte's Thrasher. During my pursuit, I could never get any closer. No matter how fast I walked, or even trotted, the bird maintained a separation distance so large that I could not see it. After covering about two miles in various directions, I was forced to abandon the attempt when the bird could no longer be detected by sound.

In February 2001, my schedule finally opened up to allow another attempt at recording LeConte's Thrasher. Remembering the difficult time I had previously had, this time I came prepared with something I had seen in an action movie: a Ghillie suit. Military forces have long used a type of personal camouflage called 3-D. It is designed to completely eliminate the human shape by using strips of cloth with different colors and textures. Before donning the suit, I had a go at finding and

recording the target bird wearing my usual drab field clothes. Using the microphone to find, and finally see, the target bird I started moving to get closer. At around 100 meters the bird would always execute its signature exit, dropping straight down from the top of a tree to run on the ground or fly just above the ground, suddenly popping up to land on the top of another distant tree. If the bird runs on the ground, it puts its tail in the air, similar to Greater Roadrunner, and quickly disappears in thick mesquite and saltbush undergrowth. After this confirmation of behavior, I added the Ghillie suit to see what would happen.

Figures 1 and 2 show the author in the suit holding a shotgun microphone with a DAT recorder on a shoulder strap. The earphones are under the hood on the author's head. Note that the frontal view would be what the target bird would see. Once again I located the bird and began my approach, always using a dense tree or bush to mask my progress. As I worked closer to the bird, I would have to move from behind cover, allowing it to see me, then move in the open until I was safely behind vegetation. As I moved, I noticed that the bird took note of me, sometimes interrupting a song, but it didn't immediately depart as before. If I froze in place, it would return to singing. Using a technique of moving from behind cover, moving a short distance and freezing, and moving back behind cover, I was finally able to get within 15 meters of the bird while it was perched and singing. Perhaps the most important result was not that I could get reasonably close, but that the bird would ignore me if I remained motionless in the suit. Any movement would cause it to stop singing and watch what I was doing. But if I remained motionless for about a minute, it would resume singing. Prior to using the suit, the bird would stop singing immediately when it spotted me and would not begin signing even if I remained motionless at a large distance.

In short, the Ghillie suit makes a big difference. A Ghillie suit consists of two pieces, a parka and hood. The parka has both a zipper and draw cord strings for securing the parka closed. It is very



comfortable in cold weather and not too hot when the temperature warms up to 30/ C (86/ F). When it gets warm, it is best to use the draw cords so more air can circulate. The hood also has a draw cord, and this is needed because the hood was not designed to fit over headphones. By drawing the cord snug, the hood will stay in place over the headphones. Along with the parka and hood a face mask is supplied for even more concealment. I did not feel the need to wear this; however others may wish to try this to see if it makes a difference. In really cold climates it would keep your face warmer. The suit is made from burlap and has been treated with something to protect it from water. This gives it a kerosene-like smell that I don't care for. My only other complaint is that the parka sheds string and fibers, and these can get on the recorder. I make sure that my recorder is protected by plastic so that the fibers can't get in the controls or the DAT drive.

Like any new technique, using the suit takes some getting used to. At first, having the strips of cloth from the hood hanging in my face was very distracting. I felt I had to see well in order to move around, so I would pull the strips aside for a better view while walking. After a while, I discovered this didn't matter, and I learned how to see where I was going with some vision blocked.

You get the best camouflage when sitting down or kneeling, because your feet and legs are hidden. You look more like a bush. However, when you try to get up, you may be kneeling or standing on one of the strips and this may cause you to trip. I just try to be ready for the problem since there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it.



The suit is well designed to be packed once you decide you are done recording. The parka has straps and clips built in so all you have to do is put the hood inside the parka and roll everything up in a tight bundle, securing it with the straps. A shoulder strap is also provided so you can easily hike back with it. This is typically what I have done because it is hot in the suit when hiking a long distance. I also try to remember to pack a hat along with my water and supplies so I have some sun protection when hiking back. Besides water, this is something I try not to be without whenever I record in the desert.

The suit pictured in the figures is the "All-Season Camo" design and seems best for desert habitats. There is also a "Mossy Oak Break-Up" design that could be better for all-green forests. Who knows what a bird sees? These Ghillie suits are available from Cabela's , 400 E. Avenue A, Oshkosh, Nebraska 69190. You can order by phone at 800-237-4444 and they have a web site at:

[www.cabelas.com](http://www.cabelas.com)

Inside the parka is a label that identifies the brand as a Shaggie®, manufactured by Rancho Safari in Ramona, California, USA. The suit comes in two sizes to fit small and large people. Many other useful camouflage items are available from Cabela's, such as "Leg Gaiters," which could be used to hide your legs when standing while wearing the ghillie suit. I hope this article gives you some ideas on how to stay hidden for better recordings.