

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture September 14th, 2011.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Bluebirds

3 species in the world, all found in North and Middle America.

Members of the thrush family.

Rather small birds of open country. Orchards are particularly good habitat for bluebirds.

All cavity nesters, use natural tree cavities, old woodpecker holes, nest boxes.

All three species have suffered severe population declines throughout most of their ranges since the middle of the 20th century. The decline is caused by the usurpation of their nesting cavities by introduced European Starlings. The NA starling population is highly aggressive and will evict any kind of cavity nesting bird out of the cavities of the proper size. A bluebird is about the size of a starling. Woodpeckers keep providing additional nesting sites by building new nests every year as long as they are successful. But birds like the Red-headed Woodpecker have also declined. They are evicted by starlings after they finished building a tree-cavity.

Conservation efforts to try to bring bluebirds back have been successful because bluebirds use bluebird houses. There are "Bluebird trails" with bluebird houses put up at certain distances along a route. Bluebirds are highly territorial birds. The houses are positioned in a way that bluebirds are willing to occupy them but starlings are not, which is under 5 feet from the ground. A lot of the bluebird trails are in agricultural areas with the houses on fence posts. They can be occupied by other species such as Tree Swallows. In areas where there are a lot of Tree Swallows double boxing is practiced, boxes are put up in pairs facing in opposite directions. Both species are territorial towards their own species but will tolerate the other species, so one of the two boxes gets occupied by Tree Swallows, the other by bluebirds.

Bluebirds hunt primarily by perching on an exposed branch, usually fairly low, and then hopping to the ground where they take beetles, grasshoppers and other insects. They feed mostly on insects but will eat berries if insects are not available.

They also hover-pounce: hover in one spot over an open field and then drop down. They do that if there are no exposed perches that they can sit on. The species that does this the most is the Mountain Bluebird. Both Eastern and Western bluebirds prefer to hunt from a perch. Mountain Bluebirds live in areas where there are fewer trees and they are more likely to hover-pounce.

Water is important for bluebirds, they are usually near areas where there is permanent water. That is particularly true for Western and Eastern bluebirds, Mountain Bluebirds are more willing to occupy areas that have no or little water.

Bluebirds look the same year round except in the juvenal plumage which is spotted and usually has more of an eye ring.

Some females don't have eye rings, it is not like females have eye rings and males don't.

Juvenals definitely have eye rings, it may be an age related trait.

Eastern Bluebird

OCCURRENCE

Breeds in the east from southern Canada to eastern Texas.

Open country with scattered trees. Frequently in pine barren habitat in the Eastern US, where the poor, sandy soil has pines that are widely scattered.

Reasonably migratory, but not a long-distance migrant.

Winters down into Mexico.

There is a little population in west Mexico that gets into grasslands in southeastern Arizona.

It is isolated from the other Eastern Bluebirds, sometime called the "Azure Bluebird".

It is paler, a little larger, sometimes has a little touch of cinnamon on its back.

No accepted Eastern Bluebird records for CA.

One sight record in eastern Mono County by a single experienced birder.

Probably overdue in CA in terms of looking at its range and at its migratory propensity.

Thrushes in general are unaccountably rare as vagrants. They are very good navigators. Any of the thrushes that are out of range in CA are unaccountably rare, but the Eastern Bluebird is spectacularly rare.

FIELD MARKS

No other bluebird has orange extending up onto the throat.

Belly snowy white on Eastern, gray on Western.

Male:

All blue upper parts.

Orange on underparts extending up onto the throat and the side of the neck.

Female:

Orange does extend up onto the throat and usually onto the side of the neck.

No orange on the back.

Female Eastern has an orange throat and a white belly,

female Western gray or off-color whitish throat and gray belly.

Western Bluebird

OCCURRENCE

Populations largely resident in some parts of the southern Rockies.

Some migratory populations further north into the Pacific Northwest.

Habitat open country, grasslands, Savannah habitat (grasslands with scattered trees).

Occur throughout much of CA. Foothill regions and valleys of CA, a bird more of foothills than anything else.

Not found in the desert regions. Really arid places like Death Valley or the Salton Sea do not have them. Instead migratory populations of Mountain Bluebirds sometimes are wintering in places like that.

In southern CA, where many of the parks are managing for bluebirds, they can become quite common in suburban and even urban parks.

They do disperse a bit.

They are seen at the abandoned Ranch at Point Reyes (first ranch at your left as you get out there), but when you get out to the outer point they become more scarce.

Sunol Regional Park has a lot.

Often in appropriate habitat where there are Acorn Woodpecker colonies. The Acorn Woodpeckers provide nesting habitat.

The Western Bluebird used to be absent from the city of SF. Only recently have they started to nest in SF, getting a toehold in parts of the Presidio. We have seen them on field trips at the Cliff House and one time behind the Bison Paddock in GG Park. Bluebirds anywhere in the city are noteworthy. They are now establishing themselves in the city, like Steller's Jays that did not use to be in the city either.

FIELD MARKS

Bill all dark.

Male:

Blue extends across the throat. The whole head is blue and there is a line between the blue throat and the orange breast.

The blue varies in intensity depending on the population.

Different subspecies have somewhat different colors, but there is also a fair amount of individual variation.

The orange blends in with gray on the belly and undertail coverts.

The orange extends to some degree onto the scapulars.

The flanks seldom have any color, if they have, it is likely to be a slaty blue.

Some individuals show a little blue in the middle of the belly or on the undertail coverts.

Down into Mexico there are really red backed birds with a lot of dark orangey red color not only on the underparts but also on the back.

Our birds have less orange on the back than the populations in Arizona for example.

Sometimes our birds can be confused with Eastern Bluebirds or possibly with Mountain Bluebirds.

Female:

Can be quite drab. Some have quite a bit of blue on them and can be confused with males, others have little or no blue.

The orange wash across the breast stops abruptly and the throat is gray. There is a line between the pale throat and the orange. That is a ghost of the male pattern.

Females are more likely to show an eye ring.

Do not rely in the intensity of the blue color to identify female bluebirds!

Some Western Bluebirds have a fairly strong spectral blue, others are decidedly paler.

There is considerable overlap in the shade of blue between female Western and Mountain bluebirds. That is a somewhat under appreciated ID-problem. An example is a mystery bird on Joe's website: <http://fog.ccsf.cc.ca.us/~jmorlan/mar00.htm>.

Most Western Bluebirds will have a trace of some kind of orange color on the back, even the females, but not all.

Juvenal:

Juvenals of Eastern and Western bluebirds are indistinguishable.

Streaked underneath, big eye ring, variable amounts of blue color, generally have white spots on the wing coverts.

There are no wing bars on bluebirds. The Lazuli Bunting is a bird with a similar pattern of blue and orange. It is much smaller than a bluebird, has a very different song and shows at least one bold wing bar. It also has a bunting type bill, short and finch-like, instead of the thrush-like bill of a bluebird.

Mountain Bluebird

OCCURRENCE

Great Basin Ranges.

They occur in sage brush scrub, pinyon juniper habitat, mostly on the east side of the Sierra.

They are birds of open country and high desert.

The most migratory of all the bluebirds. Show up regularly in the valleys and deserts of southern CA. Also regularly in the foothills of the Central and San Joaquin valleys of CA in the winter, sometimes in enormous numbers. Places like Panoche Valley, an area of rural farmland in the middle of San Benito County that is threatened by a massive solar power facility which will destroy a lot of that habitat. Depending on the year, you can drive through there and see two-three hundred Mountain Bluebirds. In other years you'll see a few or none. They are sporadic. Likewise at the Salton Sea.

In San Benito County both Western and Mountain bluebirds occur in the winter, also up on the Sutter Buttes. They may associate with each other, it is not unusual to find mixed flocks in the wintertime.

They have a propensity to occur as vagrants in the east all the way to the east coast.

In the Bay Area the Mountain Bluebird is a vagrant. Occasionally seen on a CBC (Christmas Bird Count). Some claims turn out to be misidentified Western Bluebirds. They have shown up in small flocks as far as Pt Reyes and they have reached the Farallon Islands.

Joe has seen them very few times in the nine Bay Area counties. They are regular at Patterson Pass Road in far eastern Alameda County in the wintertime. Near the wind farms, Altamont Pass area. The problem with Patterson Pass Road is that it has two lanes, it winds through the foothills, there is truck traffic on it and there are no pull-offs.

The birds are frequently found in flocks.

They frequently hover-pounce.

FIELD MARKS

Male:

Ice-blue or glacier-blue that generally extends all the way down onto the breast.

The undertail coverts can be white.

The color is seldom as dark as that of a Western or Eastern Bluebird, but especially in females there will be overlap in overall color.

The Pinyon Jay has a similar color. Is a noticeably larger bird with a much bigger bill, very different vocalizations and very different behaviors. They have partly overlapping ranges.

Female:

Rufous on the chest of females is not exceptional, see Sibley p. 400.

Some reports of Eastern Bluebirds in CA are based on birds like this.

Flank color important. Even on these birds with rufous on the chest, the flanks are gray.

The undertail coverts are white, which is a field mark of the Eastern Bluebird but also of the Mountain Bluebird.

The orange color may extend up onto the side of the neck, also a mark of Eastern Bluebird that is found in some Mountain Bluebirds.

Very long wing tips. The long primary projection is often talked about. This can be deceiving. Some Western Bluebirds also have very long primary tips. Claims that the wingtips extend beyond the tail are not true. They vary quite a bit.

A sleeker bird than Western or Eastern bluebirds. Tends to have less in the way of shoulders, the head sort of blends in with the body. Western Bluebirds often present a hunched appearance, Mountain Bluebirds do not usually give that effect.

Mountain Bluebirds have a thin all dark bill. The bills do look thicker than Sibley portrays them. But bill shape probably not completely reliable as a field mark. Eastern and Western have shorter, stubbier bills, and, at least on the Eastern, with a yellow base to the mandible.

Juvenal:

The juvenal Mountain Bluebird is said not to have spots on the back.

Townsend's Solitaire

Not a bluebird.

A thrush in its own genus.

In the mountains of Middle America and Mexico there are numerous other species of solitaires. Some of those have made their way to Arizona and even the Dakotas. The problem with all of these vagrant solitaires is that they are apparently kept in captivity in the tropics because of their beautiful and varied songs. They have all be questioned on grounds of their natural occurrence.

OCCURRENCE

A reasonably migratory bird from the western mountains.

Occurs in the Great Basin and down into the mountains of Mexico in the wintertime and in migration. Somewhat nomadic.

Occurs in a variety of habitats, but tends to prefer sage brush with pinyon or juniper.

Loves juniper berries.

Occupies a similar range and habitat to the Mountain Bluebird.

A little more likely to be found in forested areas without large openings. For example on forested areas on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada. But more likely around the edges of clearings.

Also likes areas that have been recently burned.

Does not act like a thrush, is not on the ground hopping around like a Robin.

Comes down onto the rocks sometimes, but it like to sit up on the tops of trees.

Feeds on insects but on a lot of fruit also.

Relatively few Townsend's Solitaires come to the immediate Bay Area. Most winters none are reported.

FIELD MARKS

Gray.

Really teeny bill.

Typically shows an eye ring that is bluebird-like.

Long tail, white outer tail feathers.

White tertial fringes.

Looks like an *Empidonax* flycatcher on steroids. Does flycatch.

Complicated pattern on the wing.

Orange wing stripe along the bases of the flight feathers shows up in flight. Looks like a Varied Thrush when it's overhead.

Superficial resemblance to a Mockingbird. Mockingbirds should have white patches in the wings and they don't have an eye ring. Mockingbirds have a light eye, a much longer bill.

VOCALIZATIONS

A very finch-like song.

The most annoying thing about it is a little toot-toot whistling sound that mimics the Northern Pygmy-Owl.

(Merriam's Chipmunk also does a Pygmy-Owl imitation.)