

# Mountain bluebird

*Sialia currucoides*

by Sneed B. Collard III



One sunny day in late March, I was driving backroads near Browns Lake in the Blackfoot Valley with my friend Susan Snetsinger when a large flock of birds suddenly flashed in front of us. Based on their silhouettes, we assumed they were some kind of blackbirds. We gradually realized, to our astonishment, that the entire group of at least 100 individuals consisted of mountain bluebirds. Used to seeing these birds as pairs near nest holes or boxes, we had no idea they flocked up. It just showed that, as much as I thought I knew about this species, I had plenty more to learn.

## APPEARANCE

One of America's most dazzling songbirds, the male mountain bluebird has a sky blue back, light blue breast, and white belly. Females retain traces of blue on wings and rump, but are distinctly grayer and may show a rusty tint on the breast, similar to a western bluebird. A medium-sized thrush, the mountain bluebird is slightly larger than a western bluebird and noticeably smaller than the American robin, with a slimmer silhouette. Look for a thin, black bill and black wing and tail tips. Note that juveniles, which have spotted breasts, can be easily mistaken for immature westerns.

## SOUND

The mountain bluebird's song is an up-and-down melody described in Cornell's *Birds of the World* as "more musical and variable than the song of the western bluebird, but

markedly less musical and caroling than the song of the American robin." Listen for distinct gaps between notes or phrases. Mountain bluebirds also boast a repertoire of widely spaced, generally descending calls described as *vee-er*, *burrrt*, *tew*, and *chup*.

## HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

Breeding range extends from northern Arizona and Mexico as far north as Alaska, including all of Montana. Wintering range is less certain but reaches at least from the American Southwest to central Mexico. Biologist Jeff Marks, coauthor of *Birds of Montana*, notes that the birds have also been recorded in Gallatin County in recent years in December, January, February, and March, fueling speculation that at least some individuals overwinter here. Its name notwithstanding, the mountain bluebird thrives across a wide range of altitudes, preferring open and semi-open grasslands close to suitable nesting sites.

## FEEDING

Mountain bluebirds dine mainly on ground-dwelling invertebrates, which they spot from perches or while hovering. These versatile birds also "fly-catch" insects out of the air, and in non-breeding season will ingest fruits and seeds.

## BREEDING

Where bluebird boxes are absent, mountain bluebirds sometimes nest in dirt banks, rocky outcrops, and even old pipes.

However, the birds overwhelmingly nest in holes excavated by woodpeckers and other birds. "They are absolutely a burned-forest specialist," says University of Montana biologist emeritus Dick Hutto, explaining that they are one of the earliest colonizers of the burned forest, where they nest in natural cavities and those newly created by woodpeckers. Males often arrive first to stake out a territory. Once a female selects a mate, she constructs a cup nest of soft plant material, adding animal hair on occasion. She then lays four to six sky blue eggs, which she incubates for 10 to 18 days. The male brings her food during this crucial period.

## CONSERVATION & MANAGEMENT

Human activities can both help and harm mountain bluebirds. Cattle grazing, controlled burning, and selective logging create more suitable open habitat for the species. Fire suppression, forest clearcutting, and pesticide use may remove habitat and harm birds.

In North America, the mountain bluebird population declined about 0.5 percent per year between 1968 and 2015, with a recent estimate of about 5.6 million birds. Bluebird boxes have allowed the birds to nest in areas they wouldn't normally occupy, so any loss of these human-made structures will likely reduce numbers.

Restoring the natural wildfire regime and restricting salvage logging could create more natural habitat, benefiting this and many other species. 🐦

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