

**THREE WESTERN VAGRANTS WINTER AT THE PONTOTOC RIDGE PRESERVE,  
PONTOTOC COUNTY, OKLAHOMA**

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*Abstract*—We observed three western vagrant species during a winter bird count at The Oklahoma Nature Conservancy’s Pontotoc Ridge Preserve on 28 January 2012. Participants observed a flock of Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*), a single Townsend’s Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), and at least one Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*). All three species are rare and at the limits of their distribution in south-central Oklahoma. We speculate that these species overwintered at the Preserve.

**INTRODUCTION**

Three western vagrant species, Townsend’s Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*), and Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) were discovered on 28 January 2012 on the Oklahoma Nature Conservancy’s Winter Bird Count at Pontotoc Ridge Preserve, Pontotoc County. They were observed again later in February and appeared to have wintered at the site.



**Figure 1. Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) at Pontotoc Ridge Preserve, Pontotoc County, 28 January 2012. Photo by Daniel S. Smith.**

**OBSERVATIONS**

On 28 January 2012, Jona A. Tucker (JAT), Daniel S. Smith (DSS), Nadine S. Varner (NSV), and Jimmy D. Woodard (JDW) went to the east boundary of the Preserve. At 0930 (CST), JDW entered Walnut Spring Canyon and

searched for a Townsend's Solitaire he thought he heard calling. Walnut Spring Creek flows through the canyon which consists of steep limestone walls with sparse vegetation. JDW did not find a Townsend's Solitaire at that time; however, a flock of Mountain Bluebirds was observed along an open slope on the ridge west of the canyon. The flock of 14 individuals consisted of 8-9 males with diagnostic pale blue plumage on the breast, darker blue back feathers, and thrush-like posture and bills. The remainder of the flock consisted of duller blue-gray plumaged females or immature birds. The flock foraged on the grassy slope, staying mostly in the open, but moving frequently.

The other observers in the count party joined JDW and followed the Mountain Bluebirds along the ridge further to the east along Walnut Spring Canyon. The party moved south into a sloping field with scattered trees and observed a group of eight Mountain Bluebirds in an open grassy area. This location was approximately 400 m east of the initial observation. We presumed these were part of the original group of 14 observed earlier.

The counters then surveyed birds near Carter Seeps at the southeastern boundary of the Preserve. JDW observed a Sage Thrasher in a short, vine-covered tree. DSS, NSV, and JAT also observed the Sage Thrasher and took documentation photos (Fig. 1). The bird was identified by thrasher body type, yellow eye, short slightly decurved bill, and streaked breast plumage.

On the same date, in the afternoon, JAT led a large contingent of count participants back to the same location to re-find the Mountain Bluebirds and Sage Thrasher. JAT led a group to the west ridge and JDW led the rest of the group to the east ridge of the Preserve. JAT's group found a small flock of bluebirds with one male and three female Mountain Bluebirds intermixed with two male and two female Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*). JDW's group located a small flock of eight Mountain Bluebirds at least 200 m from the other group. The mixed flock and the Mountain Bluebird flock merged into one flock of 20-30 birds including both bluebird species. Previously unobserved bluebirds of both species were noticed when the flocks merged; initially they were out of view due to the terrain. We were unable to get a final count of each species in the merged flock as it moved out of sight over a ridge. David and Susan Gainey re-sighted a flock of Mountain Bluebirds at Pontotoc Ridge Preserve on 4 February 2012 in the same vicinity (David Gainey, pers. comm.).

While scanning the ridge to the west of the Mountain Bluebird flock, a Sage Thrasher was observed perched atop a bush. The bird was observed by the entire group through a spotting scope. This thrasher was found about 670 m north of the morning sighting of the same

species. Although we cannot confirm this thrasher was a different individual from the thrasher sighted in the morning, we speculate it is possible it could have been a different individual based on the distance between sightings.

As we watched the bluebirds and thrasher, Douglas R. Wood observed a Townsend's Solitaire fly into a tall Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) on the slope across from us at eye level. The bird was identified by the grayish body, white eye ring, buff wing patches, and the white outer tail feathers. The Townsend's Solitaire foraged on berries high in the cedar tree above the bluebird flock. Eventually, it flew further up the ridge and out of sight.

### DISCUSSION

The Mountain Bluebirds were a first record for Pontotoc County (Oklahoma Bird Records Committee 2009). A Mountain Bluebird was observed at Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in November 2011 during the same winter as our sighting (Joe Grzybowski, Oklahoma Bird Records Committee, pers. comm.). We speculate this vagrancy event may be related to the severe drought Oklahoma experienced during summer 2011, in which lack of food supply may have pushed Mountain Bluebirds eastward. Conversely, it is possible that Mountain Bluebirds had a productive nesting season in 2011 and these birds invaded eastward due to intraspecific competition.

Mountain Bluebirds rarely are observed in eastern or southern Oklahoma. Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992) reported a Mountain Bluebird invasion eastward in Oklahoma in 1950-1951; they also reported a single record from Johnston County in 1956. Cooke (1914) reported a single Mountain Bluebird in Bryan County during the winter of 1883-1884.

Sage Thrashers are also rare in south-central Oklahoma. This record was the second Sage record for Pontotoc County. Carter and Tyler (1970) documented a Sage Thrasher just west of the current Pontotoc Ridge Preserve in Pontotoc County in 1968. Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992) report two other sight records for Sage Thrasher in the winter of 1956-1957. Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992) attributed all Sage Thrasher records outside Cimarron County to drought years.

This is the first Townsend's Solitaire record for Pontotoc County (Wood and Schnell 1984, Oklahoma Bird Records Committee 2009). Townsend's Solitaires are common in the Oklahoma Panhandle in Cimarron County, but are rarely observed in central Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992) or south-central Oklahoma (Sutton 1967), although they have been observed as far southeast as the Arbuckle Mountains in Murray County (Wood and Schnell 1984).

Based on our observations of these vagrants in winter at the Preserve, we speculate that this flock overwintered in south-central Oklahoma.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to thank Joe Grzybowski for reviewing this manuscript, as well as two anonymous reviewers.

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*Submitted 15 February 2012; accepted 30 April 2012.*

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The *Bulletin of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society* (ISSN 0474-0750) is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December at Tonkawa, OK. Editor, EUGENE A. YOUNG, Agriculture and Life Sciences Department, Northern Oklahoma College, 1220 E Grand, PO Box 310, Tonkawa, OK 74653-0310, (eugene.young@north-ok.edu). Subscription is by membership in the OOS: \$15 student, \$25 regular, \$35 family, \$40 or more sustaining, per year; life membership \$500. Questions regarding subscription, replacement copies, back issues, or payment of dues should be directed to DON GLASS, OOS Membership/Circulation Chairman, P.O. Box 2931, Claremore, OK 74018.