

**FALL MIGRATION OF MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS (*Sialia currucoides*)
IN NORTHWESTERN CIMARRON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA**

JOHN S. SHACKFORD¹, JACK D. TYLER², and WARREN D. HARDEN³

¹429 E. Oak Cliff Dr., Edmond, OK 73034-8626; ²4612 NW Meadowlark Dr., Lawton, OK 73505; ³P.O.Box 720155, Norman, OK 73070-4120

Abstract—We report on the migration of Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) during October 2016, in the general area of the Black Mesa, Cimarron County, Oklahoma. Based on Christmas Bird Count data and our observations, it appears that early Mountain Bluebird flocks migrate through the region while later flocks may winter in the area. Our data and the literature for Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) suggest that the Mountain Bluebird most likely is a diurnal migrant.

INTRODUCTION

The Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) can often be a plentiful winter resident in the Black Mesa area of northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma (Sutton 1967, Sutton 1982, Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992, National Audubon Society 2000-2015). However, little data is available on their migration patterns in the region. Herewith, we report observations of migration as observed in fall, 2016.

OBSERVATIONS

David Wiggins visited the general area of northwestern Cimarron County in early October 2016. On the 4-5 October, he reported no Mountain Bluebirds in the Black Mesa area, but on the 5th he did find ca. 15-20 in northeastern New Mexico, two of which were only about a mile west of the Oklahoma state line. Thus, it appears that a few Mountain Bluebirds were just starting to arrive in the general region of the Black Mesa.

We visited the area later in the month. Tyler and Shackford were there from 18-23 October, with Harden joining us the last four days.

Although we encountered a paucity of birds in general, we did find Mountain Bluebirds to be plentiful most days. Even though nightly temperatures hovered near freezing, the days were sunny and pleasant with highs from 10-15°C. We arrived late in the afternoon of 18 October, and observed 19 Mountain Bluebirds in the area. Because first year male bluebirds look like adult females (Power and Lombardo 1996), we had no way of ascertaining the sex ratio of males to females, but we did observe adult males in the flock.

On 19 October, we drove due southward along the road from Black Mesa State Park at Lake Etling to near Wheelless, Oklahoma, a distance of some 16 km; the general habitat is shortgrass prairie rangeland. We conservatively estimated seeing 130 Mountain Bluebirds, comprising about 95% of all birds seen.

After Harden arrived on 20 October, the three of us continued to see many bluebirds. On the morning of 21 October, we observed great numbers of them in flocks ranging from 200-300 individuals at a time, near Lake Etling; there were so many birds flying around it was impossible to get accurate estimates of their total number. Many were flying into a large dead elm tree (*Ulmus sp.*) nearby, and then into a one-seeded juniper tree (*Juniperus monosperma*), where they were feeding on the berries. The many droppings left on a picnic table at the campsite contained one-seed juniper seeds. An abundance of bluebirds in flocks of 8-20 individuals were seen all day throughout the area. Many were observed along fence lines, where the bluebirds sometimes made short flights, apparently to catch insects. Feeding on juniper berries and catching insects appeared to be their primary food-gathering techniques that day.

On the evening of the 21st, we saw none of the large bluebird flocks at our campsite. None of the huge flocks there the previous morning returned the next morning (22 October). On the 22 October, only an estimated 10-20% of the number of small flocks seen on the previous four days was present. We speculated that the precipitous decline in Mountain Bluebird numbers might signal that these early flocks were continuing southward, likely to winter in Texas or Mexico (Power and Lombardo 1996). Our initial perception was that they were moving into the region to winter since northwestern Oklahoma is a known wintering area (Sutton 1967, Sutton 1982, Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992). Apparently, we had observed birds that had migrated in on or before 21 October, and then continued with an exodus southward.

DISCUSSION

In trying to determine what time of day Mountain Bluebirds migrate, we asked William A. Carter, an authority on the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), but he had no firsthand knowledge regarding even Eastern Bluebird migration (fide William A. Carter). After a literature check, which included Bent (1964) and Power and Lombardo (1996), we found only the following scant information pertaining only to Eastern Bluebirds: "There is no evidence of nocturnal migration, such as nightcalls and television tower kills, as there is for other thrushes..." (Graber 1971). In addition, between 1974 and 1984, J. L. Norman (1987) found not a single bluebird among 1802 individuals of 87 species killed at a TV tower in northeastern Oklahoma. Young (1993) did not find any bluebirds during an avian mortality study of a transmission tower during fall (1992) in Cimarron County, south of Black Mesa. Thus, circumstantial evidence suggests that bluebirds might not be common nocturnal migrants. On this hypothesis, most birds we saw would have migrated southward during the day 21 October.

A tentative explanation for this exodus would be that food resources in the Black Mesa area were inadequate to hold the bluebirds this particular winter. A check of previous Christmas Bird Count (CBC) data for the Kenton CBC from 2000-2015, show an average number of Mountain Bluebirds for the period to be 44.87 birds per party hour, while the number on the 2016 count (1 January 2017) was 1.52 birds per party hour (fide Eugene A. Young). These very low Mountain Bluebird numbers support our hypothesis.

The brief appearance of large numbers of Mountain Bluebirds on October 21 might possibly indicate that the Black Mesa area lies on a frequently used fall migration route. In any case, such a migratory pattern has not previously been documented in the Black Mesa area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Jeff Cox, Sebastian Patti, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments, which enhanced our final manuscript. Eugene Young kindly provided unpublished data from Cimarron County.

LITERATURE CITED

- Baumgartner, F. M., and A. M. Baumgartner. 1992. Oklahoma bird life. Univ. OK Press, Norman.
- Bent, A. C. 1964. Life Histories of North American thrushes, kinglets, and their allies. *Bull. U.S. Natl. Mus. vol. no. 196*: pp. 285-6.
- Graber, R. R., J. W. Graber and E. L. Kirk. 1971. Illinois birds: Turdidae. *Illinois Nat. Hist. Surv., Biol. Notes No. 75*, p. 34.
- National Audubon Society. 2000-2015. Christmas bird counts. Kenton, Oklahoma. Available at: <http://www.netapp.audubon.org/CBCObservation/Historical/ResultsByCount.aspx>.
- Norman, J. L. 1987. Synopsis of birds killed at the Coweta, Oklahoma, TV tower (1974-1984). *Bull, Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.*, 20:17-22.
- Power, H. W., and M. P. Lombardo. 1996. Mountain bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*), in The Birds of North America (P. G. Bodewald, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab Ornithol., Ithaca, NY, pp. 2-4.
- Sutton, G. M. 1967. Oklahoma birds. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma.
- Sutton, G. M. [1982] Species summaries of OK bird records. OK Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. OK, Norman. Unpubl.
- Young, E.A. 1993. Bird Mortality at the Boise City LORAN-C Tower, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, Fall 1992. Report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services, Tulsa, Oklahoma. 51 pp.

Received 27 December 2016; accepted 1 February 2018.

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, Science, and Engineering Division, Northern Oklahoma College, 1220 E Grand, PO Box 310, Tonkawa, OK 74653-0310, (eugene.young@noc.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 LINDA ADAMS, OOS Membership/Circulation Chair, P.O. Box 24, Duncan, OK 73533.