

Wild Wednesday 4 November 2020. Bluebirds by Walt Anderson

These days if you see a Bluebird on the street, it's likely a school bus!



That reflects the intense urbanization of our society, where kids are often trapped within the built environment and disconnected from nature. Even we adults can get hung up on “predictions of a blue wave” or “singing the blues.”

Today, however, I want to celebrate bluebirds, true-blue songsters that epitomize beauty and joy (the bluebird of happiness, for example). Then I urge you to step beyond the sidewalk and out into nature, where you have a very good chance of running into some wild bluebirds.

In winter months, most of Arizona hosts flocks of two species: the sky-blue Mountain Bluebird and the deep-blue and rusty Western Bluebird. Both of these breed in northern parts of the state and move south and downslope to some extent in the winter. A third species, the Azure race of the Eastern Bluebird, is resident in the evergreen oak woodlands of the Huachucas and Patagonias near the southern border. Once in a blue moon, you can spot one outside of that small area.

In the Granite Dells and elsewhere in Prescott, we find the Western Bluebird in riparian areas, like Granite Basin Lake or Watson Woods or Granite Creek as it threads through the Dells, and in pinyon-juniper and ponderosa pine stands wherever there is sufficient food and water. Mountain Bluebirds are more often in grassland areas and in pinyon-juniper woodlands. In this drought year, the birds are quite dependent on visiting water.

During the breeding seasons, both species capture insects or other invertebrates, often by sallying out from a branch to grasp the victim in mid-air or plunging to the ground, where sharp eyes and hearing detect the slightest movement. In fall and winter, berries and other fruits are avidly sought.

Bluebirds have declined throughout the continent because of habitat loss, predation by domestic cats, eviction (often fatal) by House Sparrows and European Starlings, and pesticide poisoning, directly or through the food web. In some areas, humans have helped out by erecting bluebird nesting boxes. All of these threats are human-induced and our responsibility to mitigate.

I long for the day when a child thinks “bird” and not “bus” at the mention of a bluebird!



The sky blue of a male Mountain Bluebird is not a pigment; it is a structural color where the architecture of the feather reflects blue light. Backlit, a feather would look light brown from melanin pigment.



The Western Bluebird's feathers reflect a deeper blue, while the rusty feathers contain carotenoid pigments.



Male bluebirds are much more colorful than females. Sexual selection means the brightest males get the ladies. Note the differences in these birds.



Western Bluebirds are attracted to water, which can affect their distribution in the landscape, especially during drought. Note the female Western Bluebird on the left, two males on the right.



Mountain Bluebirds gathered for some liquid refreshment. Sociality gives some protection from predation. Never go to the bar alone!



This female Western Bluebird drinks from a tiny seep in the forest.



Bluebirds commonly watch from a perch, then fly out to capture prey on the ground or in the air.



Like the American Robin, its thrush cousin, a bluebird locates earthworms, spiders, and insects with its keen hearing and sight.



Bluebirds, like many other thrushes, feast on berries during the winter: pyracantha, mistletoe, silktassel, hackberry, blackberry, and more. They often defecate while flying, especially when over my windshield. This seed dispersal can help increase the abundance of their food plants. This works out well for both parties, a great example of a **non-symbiotic mutualism**. [Note: symbiosis only means living together, while a mutualism is a win-win for both species. Symbiosis does not mean it benefits both parties; tapeworms are an example of symbiotic parasitism]. You'll find "symbiosis" used incorrectly often, but now you know!



Most years when junipers produce thousands of berries can result in flocks of dozens to hundreds of feasting bluebirds, often accompanied by American Robins, Hermit Thrushes, Townsend Solitaires, Sage Thrashers, and more.



As is true for most dentists, the lifestyle of bluebirds is dependent on cavities. They are secondary cavity nesters, using holes created by woodpeckers.



Bluebirds are fairly tame and confiding. I was no more than 20 feet away from this gorgeous male Western Bluebird. They are often attracted to city parks or even golf courses if there are fruits and water; thus you don't have to migrate to the wilderness, but you can encourage your park staff to provide habitat for these lovely wild neighbors.



In this stressful year of 2020, I think you'll find that Mountain and Western Bluebirds are good counterpoints to the blues. As soon as you read this caption, shut off your device and head out into the wild blue yonder. You'll be glad you did.

