

## Bluebirds

Susan A. Heath

I heard the song "Bluebird" by Paul McCartney and Wings the other day and ever since I can't stop thinking about the beautiful blues of our bluebirds. In Texas we have three species of bluebirds, not to be confused with other species of birds that are blue such as Blue Jays. During the breeding season, Eastern Bluebirds range over a good part of the state. Western Bluebirds only breed in the far west part of the state. During the winter Western Bluebirds move around a bit and can be found in a larger area but still mostly in the western part of the state. Both species are very pretty birds with blue heads, backs, wings and tails and rufous on their breasts but Western Bluebirds also have a little bit of that rufous color on their upper back which is how you can distinguish the two. Males are brighter blue than females so they can attract a mate. Both nest in cavities and will readily take to boxes. You can often see these two bluebird species perched on power lines or fences as they hunt their primary food which is insects. They also eat berries from fruiting trees and shrubs.

So that's two species, what is the third? The stunningly beautiful Mountain Bluebird fills out the slate. They are gorgeous blue with no rufous like the other two species. Males are sky blue on the back and a bit lighter underneath and females are mostly gray with tinges of blue in the wings and tail. During winter Mountain Bluebirds gather into roaming flocks that go in search of food mostly in fruiting junipers. They are not present in Texas every winter but so you have to wait until what's called an irruption year (when species irrupt south) to see them here. They often forage on the ground in fields with short vegetation and the contrast between the blue of the birds and the green of the vegetation can be stunning.

Unlike the other two species, Mountain Bluebirds often hover when hunting insects. They breed in the western U.S. at middle and higher elevations in open habitats with a few trees to provide cavities. They will also readily take to nest boxes like the other two bluebird species. In all three bluebird species the female builds the nest and incubates the eggs. All bluebirds have to contend with competition for nesting cavities from swallows, nuthatches, woodpeckers, wrens, and starlings so providing nest boxes for them is very valuable. We have bluebird boxes up at GCBO and have at least one pair of Eastern Bluebirds and possibly more that nest here every spring. They raise two or three broods per year and so are quite productive! If you want to see them in action come by in the spring when they are nest building, incubating their eggs, and feeding their young. You can see the adults going in and out of the nest boxes and follow their progress until the babies fledge. It's very exciting stuff!