

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES

24. MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD

RICHARD P. GUTHRIE and JEFFREY A. DAVIS

On 20 December 1974, while conducting a preliminary survey for the Audubon Christmas Bird Count in the Town of Coxsackie, Greene County, New York (42° 18' 33"N, 73° 48' 23"W), we observed a bluebird perched in a treetop along a brushy fence row. The bird was first examined, and noted as a bluebird, from about 130 yards (119 meters) through a 20X lens. The absence of the rusty breast typical of the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) suggested the need for closer observation. The bird was subsequently studied for 45 minutes through both 20X and 30X lenses at distances as close as 30 yards (27 meters). Our ability to view the bird's plumage at close range compensated for less than ideal lighting on an overcast day, allowing us to tentatively identify it as an immature male Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*). The two most distinctive features were the silhouette and lack of rust on the breast. In closer, the bird was grayish blue overall with deeper blue (cerulean) limited to the primaries, tail and rump area. In flight, the bird seemed to be more buoyant than the Eastern Bluebird, often hovering for a short period—especially immediately prior to alighting. The only vocalization heard was a single, soft ventriloquial "churr" uttered infrequently and generally just after the bird took flight.

Subsequently, on 22 December 1974 and 4 January 1975, Guthrie obtained color photographs, as the bird remained at its original location. To help substantiate the identification we examined skins of the three North American bluebird species at the New York State Museum, Albany, and the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. With the aid of these color photographs and those taken by others, Mr. John Bull of the Department of Ornithology at the American Museum has confirmed that the Coxsackie individual was a Mountain Bluebird. A color print taken by Allen Schroeder has been deposited in the American Museum of Natural History collection as permanent documentation.

The New York individual remained near its original location for at least 72 days, being exceedingly unwary and behaviorably predictable. During this period, the bird was also observed at close range by many competent observers who concurred with our identification.

The bird fed regularly on the fruits of buckthorn (*Rhamnus* sp.),



MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD

Coxsackie, N.Y.; 21 January 1975;

Photo by Davis W. Finch;

Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History

wild grape (*Vitis* sp.), and yew (*Taxus* sp.). During periods of severe weather, it fed on a manure pile adjacent to a dairy barn some 1600 yards (1.5 kilometers) southwest of the original site. On numerous occasions it was observed hovering in the air just prior to perching. Among bluebirds, hovering behavior is apparently peculiar to *Sialia currucoides* (Bent, 1949, *Life Histories of North American Thrushes, Kinglets, and Their Allies*, Bull. 196, U.S. Nat. Mus., Washington, D.C.).

The locality where the bird was first seen, and subsequently observed most often, is of mixed cover types: brushy fence row, small evergreen nursery, adjacent to open pastureland. The general area, located in the mid-Hudson valley several miles east of the Catskill Mountains, is rolling farmland interspersed with old fields and small woodlots.

Primarily a species of the western mountains, Mountain Bluebirds breed as far east as North Dakota (Kermott, *et al.*, *Wilson Bull.*, 1974, 86(1): 83-84). During various winters "displaced" individuals have been previously reported as far east as Point Pelee, Ontario (*American Birds*, 1972, 26(3): 599) and southeastern Pennsylvania (*American Birds*, 1974, 28(3): 624). The present sighting is the first reported occurrence for the species in New York State.

The term "displacement" has been applied to birds that are encountered far from their normal range. The phenomenon is believed to represent some malfunction of the orientation mechanism in migrant species. Immature birds are more prone to such wanderings than are adults.

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