

# Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

Illustrations by Kenn Kaufman

## Bluebirds

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THE BLUEBIRDS REPRESENT A distinctively North American trio. There are only three species in the world: Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*), and Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*). All three are found in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, but that is practically the extent of their range—although the Eastern Bluebird, like a number of other “northern” birds, gets as far south as the pinelands of Nicaragua.

Within North America, there are many areas where the species can be identified by range most of the time. Mountain Bluebird, a western species that nests at high elevations and at high latitudes, has strayed to the Atlantic Coast a number of times. Eastern Bluebirds from eastern North America have strayed as far west as southern Arizona, thus entering the range of the sedentary race *S. s. fulva*, the “Mexican” Eastern Bluebird. Surprisingly, the Eastern has not yet been found in California. I suspect that eventually Californians will find one by carefully checking through flocks of Mountain Bluebirds in the eastern part of the state in winter.

With birds as brightly colored as male bluebirds, we may fall into the trap of not really noticing anything but the colors. However, with relatively plain females or with problem males, we need to consider more subtle clues. There are minor points of shape and behavior and non-obvious markings that are important for identification in such cases.

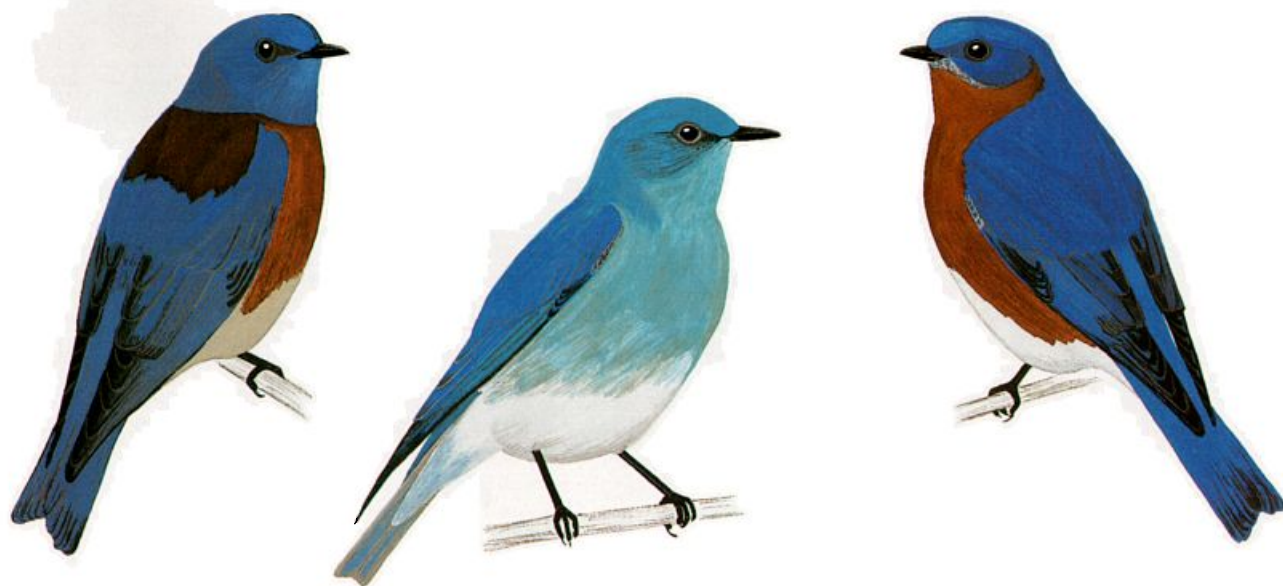
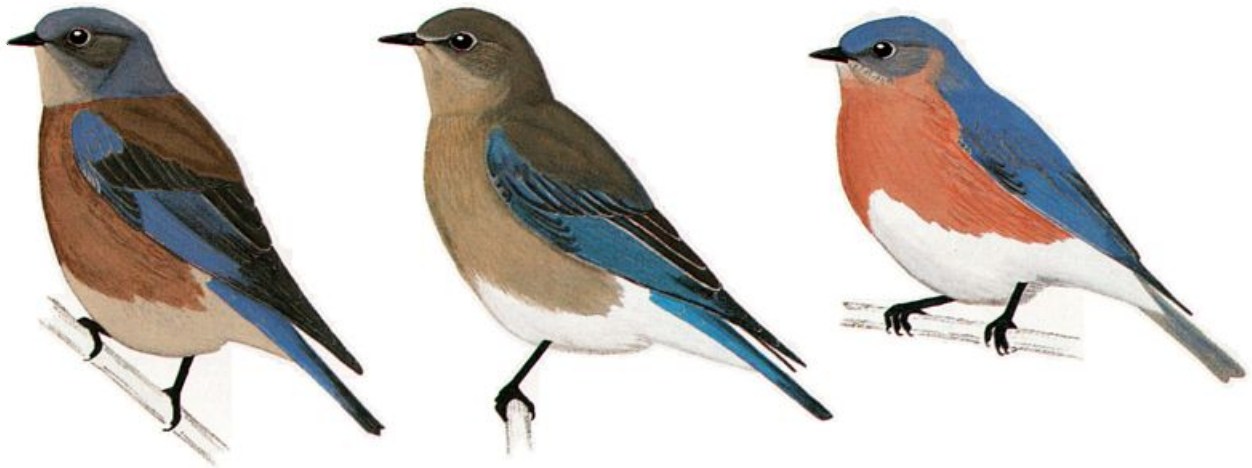


Figure 1. Adult males of Western Bluebird (left), Mountain Bluebird (center), and Eastern Bluebird (right).



**Figure 2. Adult females of Western Bluebird (left), Mountain Bluebird (center), and Eastern Bluebird (right). Notice the colors of the undertail coverts, chest, and back. The differences in shape shown by Mountain Bluebird are often more evident than colors or markings at a distance.**

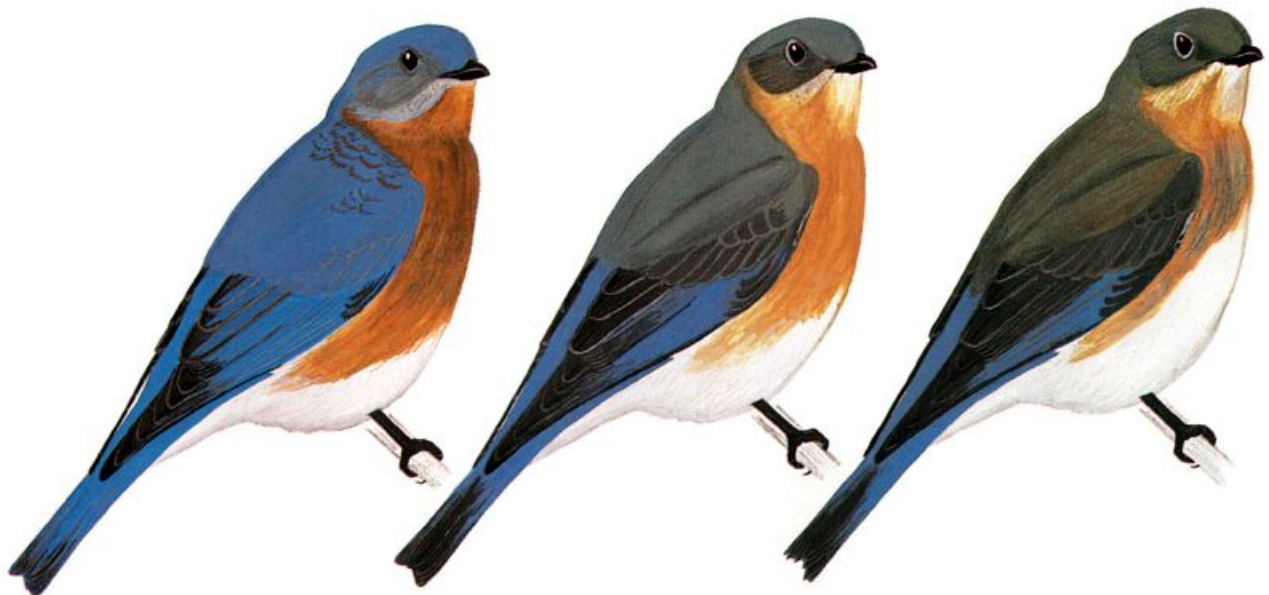
Female bluebirds are less flashy than the males, but they wear soft colors that are particularly pleasing with a close study. In general, their patterns shadow those of the males—with blue replaced by blue-gray or gray, and deep rust replaced by pale rust or warm brownish-gray. Females always show some blue in the wings

and tail (more in adults, less in first-winter females) but the slight differences in shade of blue are not helpful for separating the species.

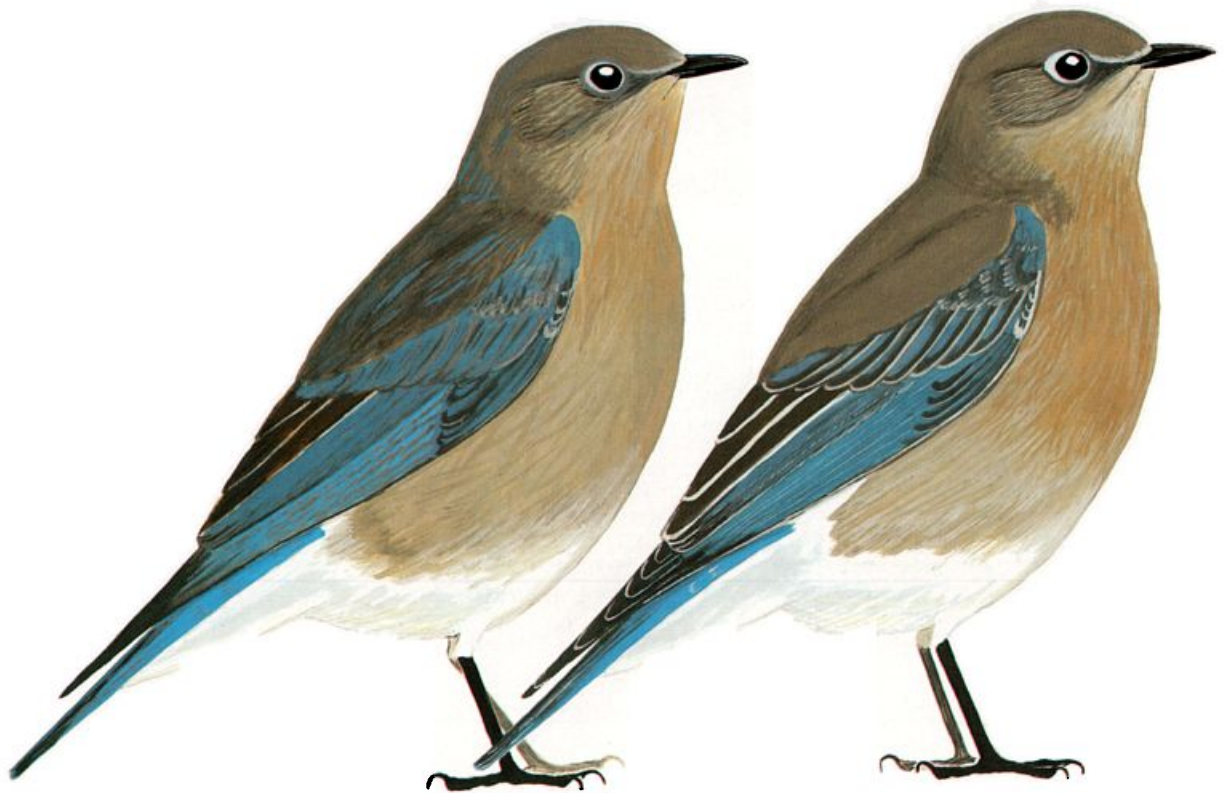
Throat color is often mentioned as a field mark for separating Eastern and Western bluebirds, but it can be difficult to judge on females, since the whitish chin of the Eastern can be

fairly close to the appearance of the gray throat of the Western.

On female Westerns, there is often a distinct line of contrast between the brownish-gray back and the blue-gray nape. Dull female Easterns can be brownish above, but without any back-to-nape contrast. But on a particularly dull individual of either



**Figure 3. Variations on Eastern Bluebird. Left: adult male of the race *S. s. fulva* from Mexico, a permanent resident locally in southeastern Arizona. It tends to be paler and duller overall (for a given age/sex class) than the Eastern Bluebirds found farther east in the United States and Canada. Rusty edgings on the feathers of the upper back may be a little more prevalent on this race, but they are also seen on other male Easterns in fresh plumage. Center and right: two variations on dull female Easterns. Some first-winter females look essentially dull gray and brown in the field. An individual like the one at the right, with brownish back and mostly grayish-white throat, might even be mistaken for a Western Bluebird, although its belly and undertail coverts are much whiter than in that species.**



**Figure 4. Seasonal variation in female Mountain Bluebirds. Fresh plumage (late fall) on right, worn plumage (mid-summer) on left. The pale edges on the wing feathers are far more obvious when the plumage is fresh. Worn birds may look darker above, but they also actually may show more blue on the upperparts then. The wash of orange-buff on the chest is variable at all seasons, but it is occasionally bright enough to suggest a dull female Eastern Bluebird.**

species, one of the best marks is the color of the lower belly and undertail coverts: gray in Western, extensively white in Eastern.

Mountain Bluebird females are often depicted as being all shades of gray. But at times, especially in fresh plumage, they show a strong wash of orange-buff on the chest and throat. The brightest of such individuals have been confused with Eastern Bluebirds on occasion. Like Eastern, this species has bright white undertail coverts.

Mountain Bluebird has, on average, distinctly longer wings than Eastern Bluebird. It averages slightly longer-winged than Western Blue-

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bird, but the difference is not apparent on perched birds. (Contrary to some published statements, the wingtips of Mountain Bluebird do not extend “to or beyond the tip of the tail” when the bird is at rest.) The wingtip-to-tail ratio looks about the same on perched Western and Mountain bluebirds. Western may even seem relatively longer-winged then, perhaps because its body is shorter and more compact.

The longer wings of Mountain Bluebirds become more apparent when the birds are flying: in the air they look longer-winged and slightly longer-tailed than the other two species, and their wingbeats are slow-





**Figure 5.** The amount of rusty-brown color on the back of the male Western Bluebird is quite variable. The birds shown do not represent the most extreme examples, however; some male Westerns lack any trace of rusty color on the back. The extent of blue on the throat also varies, although it typically ends at the base of the throat, as on the left-hand bird here. Many show a patch of blue at the center of the lower breast and upper belly. A few individuals have patches of rusty-brown on the face (like the bird on the left).

er and more graceful.

In addition to longer wings, Mountain Bluebird also has a longer bill and longer legs than the other two species. Its body shape and posture also look different, with less of a "hunchback" look. With practice, its more elegant stance is apparent even at long distances.

Male bluebirds are generally regarded as easy to identify, and usually they are. However, Western Bluebird is quite variable, and some of its extremes could be confusing. Some males have no rufous color on the back, for example. Conversely, some male Eastern Bluebirds *do* have rufous edgings on the back feathers in fresh plumage. In either case, birders

can avoid getting into trouble if they will look at the whole bird rather than relying on one or two "diagnostic" field marks.

There is one bluebird problem that may stymie even a careful observer: the possibility of hybrids. Eastern Bluebird and Mountain Bluebird do interbreed in small numbers where their nesting ranges overlap, primarily in the southern Prairie Provinces of Canada. In that region, hybrids might be identified in the field, with caution; elsewhere, a bird that appears intermediate might be one of these hybrids, but the only safe field identification would be "unidentified." ▶

#### References and acknowledgments

My illustrations for this column were based on my field sketches done in several parts of North America, and on specimens in the collection of the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona in Tucson. As always, I am grateful to Stephen M. Russell and Thomas R. Huels for allowing me access to that collection. Some of the field marks discussed here were first pointed out to me by Jon L. Dunn. Thanks also to Janet Witzeman for important information.