

Mountain Bluebird *Sialia currucoides*

Ornithological History: Mailliard (1932) found Mountain Bluebird present on 30 April 1928 and nesting at every location he visited. A juvenile male was collected on 31 May 1928 at Creston.

Munro (1950) commented: *The Mountain Bluebird, both in 1947 and 1948, appeared to be much less common in the Creston region than in other British Columbia valleys. The annual flooding of the primitive parts of the Kootenay Flats that otherwise would provide suitable nesting territories, the scarcity of trees with nesting holes on the reclaimed lands, and the high cultivation of the bench lands, greatly reduces the amount of habitat suitable to this species. The September migration of Mountain Bluebirds, so vivid a picture along many British Columbia country roads, was hardly noticeable here.* Several broods of juveniles were seen from 4 to 19 August 1947. The largest number recorded in a day was 10 birds on 10 September 1947. The latest record was 23 September 1948.

Butler et al. (1986) considered this species to be frequent and widespread. It arrived in early April and nested at low elevation in May and higher elevation in June. The latest sighting was 30 June.

Creston Valley Status: A fairly common to common migrant and casual in winter; breeds.

Occurrence: Mountain Bluebird occurs annually but is more conspicuous during spring migration than in autumn. The species ranges from valley bottom to higher elevations. Sightings of 1 or 2 birds account for 87% of all records while sightings of 6 or more birds account for 7% of records.

Spring arrivals show up during the first two weeks of March with small waves of Mountain Bluebirds moving through the region until late April. Pat Huet recorded a male in her Canyon garden on 3 March [2006] for the earliest arrival date. In mid-to-late April, migrants often overlap with local nesting birds. For example, Hardy and Anita Delafield recorded 48 birds foraging in a field along Kootenay River Road on 7 April 2012. The highest number of detections occurs in May (56% of records) which corresponds with the breeding period.

From June through mid-July, Mountain Bluebirds are found on breeding territories along nest box routes and in open habitats with available tree cavities. Over half (66%) of sightings occur in June with a decline in July (32%). The fewest records occur in August (2%) when nesting territories are vacated. My highest summer count was a flock of 63 birds (adults and juveniles) feeding in a stubble field near Mallory Road



A male Mountain Bluebird may share incubation duties with the female, but more importantly provides insects to feed nestlings and fledged young. *Photo by Mark Nyhof.*

Seasonal Occurrence Records

- Spring – 1,060 records from 3 March to 31 May (1 to 48 birds)
- Summer – 456 records from 1 June to 31 August (1 to 63 birds)
- Autumn – 61 records from 1 September to 9 November (1 to 43 birds)
- Winter – 2 records on 11 and 13 December (1 bird)

in Lister on 24 August 1997. On Mount Thompson, 23 birds were noted on 23 August 2014 by Hardy and Anita Delafield.

Autumn migration is subtle. Small numbers of bluebirds pass through the region in September until late October, mostly recorded in logged clearings and mountain meadows. For example, Marcia Long noted 22 birds on 9 September 2016 in a cutblock in the Six Mile Creek area. On 16 September 1994, I saw a group of 11 birds foraging in a grassy meadow on Mount Thompson and a flock of 36 birds, mostly juveniles, feeding near the edge of a field in Canyon on 5 September 1997. The highest autumn count was 43 birds recorded by Hardy Delafield on 18 September 2018 in Lister. Marc-André Beaucher observed a single Mountain Bluebird perched on a mullein stalk at Duck Lake on 9 November [2003] for the latest departure date.

There are two winter records. I recorded a male bluebird foraging in a brushy area along Duck Lake Road on 13 December 2006 and Gary Breault sighted a female searching for food at the southwest end of Duck Lake on 11 December 2012.

Breeding: Mountain Bluebird nests in natural cavities, abandoned woodpecker holes, and nest boxes. It breeds from the valley bottom (535 m/1,755 ft) to the subalpine (2,137 m/7,011 ft) with the majority of records on the bench lands of Canyon and Lister (660 m/2,165 ft). The height of nests at natural sites ranged from 0.7 m (2.5 ft) to 9.1 m (30 ft). Nest building is often initiated in early to mid-April. The nest is often refurbished for a second clutch or a new one might be built on top. The breeding period is protracted as two broods are commonly reared in a season. Nests with eggs and/or nestlings have been recorded between 28 April and 26 August. Clutch size ranged from 4 to 6 eggs and brood size from 2 to 6 young. Families of 2 to 5 dependent young have been recorded from 15 June to 18 July.

In British Columbia, clutch size is typically 4 or 5 eggs and brood size 4 or 5 young.

Notable breeding activity:

From 1999 to 2010, Vic Cousineau monitored a nest box route in Lister and documented details on 35 Mountain Bluebird nests. Finding predated and/or abandoned eggs and nestlings was always a disappointment for Vic but during those 12 years he recorded 81 nestlings that successfully fledged. In the first year, two pairs occupied the boxes. There were 6 eggs in Box #14 on 9 May but 10 days later the nest appeared abandoned with cold eggs and no adults. Box #9 had a more positive outcome when a female was incubating 5 eggs on 19 May and hatched 5 young by 18 June. Two nestlings were found dead in the nest on 26 June but the others fledged.

On 5 July 2005, I observed a male and female

Mountain Bluebird making repeated food deliveries to a nest site in a weathered old snag atop Mount Thompson. The cavity was located 2.7 m (9 ft) from the ground.

Lorraine Scott and Sharon Laughlin monitored two nest box routes from 2006 to 2017 on Kootenay Flats and the bench lands. At the landfill site in Lister, a single pair of Mountain Bluebirds nested unsuccessfully. On 30 May 2010, four dead nestlings were found in Box #7. However, on Lower Kootenay First Nation's land, nest boxes were used in 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016, and 2017; 30 young fledged in those years.

On 1 June 2012, Marcia Long discovered a natural nest site in a 6 m (20 ft) dead tree in the Crackerjack Creek area. Both male and female were making repeated food deliveries into an old Northern Flicker cavity 4.8 m (16 ft) from the ground. The following day, adults continued with feeding and the female exited with a fecal sac. On 16 June, adults were observed with 3 fledglings in the vicinity of the nest tree.



Finding a pair of Mountain Bluebirds nesting in a natural setting is always exciting. A Northern Flicker had excavated and nested in this cavity the previous season.

Databases: Occurrence records (1,579) and breeding records (81)

Habitat: During spring migration, Mountain Bluebird frequents open grassy areas and agricultural lands on Kootenay Flats and the bench lands. In autumn, migrant flocks forage in open clearcuts, mountain meadows, and farm fields. Nest boxes are used for nesting at lower elevation and tree cavities at mid-to-upper elevations.