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Birds of the Rocky Mountains—Species Accounts, pages 298–313: Thrushes, Thrashers, & Pipits

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Eastern Bluebird (Sialia sialis)

Identification: Male eastern bluebirds are very similar to western bluebirds, but lack brown on the back, and have reddish brown rather than blue throats. Females of the two species are very similar, but female eastern bluebirds have paler, whitish throats, while those of westerns (and mountains) have much more dusky throats.

LATII	ONG	STAT	US

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Status: Limited to deciduous woodlands along rivers on the plains of eastern Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. Generally absent from the montane parks, but rare during migration in Rocky Mountain N.P.

Habitats and Ecology: Generally associated with open deciduous woods that are close to grasslands, such as riparian forests, shelterbelts, farmsteads, and city parks. Nesting occurs in old woodpecker holes, natural cavities of dead trees, dead limbs, or sometimes utility poles. Birdhouses are also frequently used, especially where natural cavities are relatively rare.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from March 19 to November 29. There are few records from farther north, but probably are comparable to those of the mountain bluebird. Egg records for Colorado and Montana are for June.

Comments: Eastern and western bluebirds have virtually complementary ranges, although in eastern Montana and eastern Wyoming a limited degree of geographic overlap does occur. In such areas the western bluebird is likely to utilize coniferous woods and the eastern deciduous woods, although both use aspens.

Suggested Reading: Hartshorne, 1962; Thomas, 1946; Peakall, 1970.

Western Bluebird (Sialia mexicana)

Identification: Similar to the eastern bluebird, but males have a blue throat and a variable amount of chestnut on the upper back. Females are very similar to those of the eastern bluebird, but their throats are dusky gray rather than reddish buff. They also resemble females of the mountain bluebird, but are more rusty on the flanks and breast area.

Status: A local summer resident in northwestern and southwestern parts of the region, primarily in western Colorado and the northern parts of Idaho. Generally rare or absent from the montane parks, but an uncommon breeder in Rocky Mountain N.P.

Habitats and Ecology: Rather open timberlands, either of deciduous or coniferous trees, seem to be this species' favored habitats. It breeds in both aspens and ponderosa pine woodlands, and during the nonbreeding season extends out into the woodlands of pinyon-juniper, oak-mountain mahogany, and some agricultural or desert scrub habitats. A combination of timberlands having dead trees with natural cavities or living trees with woodpecker holes and nearby open grassy areas for foraging seems to provide optimum habitats. Breeding also extends to the level of mountain meadows, sometimes about 10,000 feet above sea level.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from February 23 to November 5, and in Montana the birds are typically present from mid-March to mid-September. Egg records in Colorado are from May 6 to July 1.

Comments: In contrast to the eastern bluebird, this species is relatively silent, and its song is far less melodious. During migration the birds often are seen in company with mountain bluebirds.

Suggested Reading: Grinnell & Storer, 1924; Myers, 1912.

LATILONG STATUS

LATILONG STA				
S	S	s		
s	s			
S	S	S	?	

M		?	
?	V	М	M
	M	M	M

		М	М
		s	М
S	s	S	S



Mountain Bluebird (Sialia currucoides)

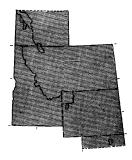
Identification: Male mountain bluebirds are the only birds of the region that are virtually entirely sky blue, except for their whitish underparts. Females are mostly grayish brown above and below, but exhibit blue coloration on the wing and tail surfaces. Like the western bluebird it is a relatively quiet species, and its song is soft and warbling.

LATILONG STATUS

s	s	s	s
S	S	S	S
S	S	S	S

S	S	s	S
S	S	S	S
s	S	S	S

S	S	S	S
S	S	S	S
S	S	S	S



Status: The most common and widespread of the bluebirds of the region, especially in rather open woodlands. Fairly common in all of the montane parks, and breeding in all.

Habitats and Ecology: Breeding occurs in open woodlands and forest-edge habitats from mountain meadows downward through the ponderosa pine zone, the aspen zone, and into the pinyon-juniper zone. Typically the birds favor nesting where either dead trees are available for nest cavities or where rock crevices or other suitable sites are present.

Seasonality: Generally resident in Wyoming, and present in Wyoming nearly throughout the year, with records from February 21 to November 2, with migration peaks in March and October. In Montana and Alberta the birds are usually present from mid-March to mid-October. Colorado egg records are from May 2 to June 12, while those from Wyoming are from May 10 to July 25. Montana egg records are from May 5 to July 9.

Comments: At least over much of their range, mountain bluebirds are double-brooded, and after the female begins her second clutch her mate typically remains with the first brood for about 10 days after they fledge. Rarely have the young of the first brood been observed helping to feed the second one.

Suggested Reading: Criddle, 1927; Power, 1966; Haecker, 1948.

Townsend's Solitaire (Myadestes townsendi)

Identification: This unusual member of the thrush family somewhat resembles a large flycatcher, and has a mostly grayish body with a white-edged tail, a pale eye-ring, and pale orange wing-patches that are evident only in flight. The song of the male is an extended melodious warbling that is one of the most beautiful of western bird songs.

Status: Widespread in wooded mountainous areas of the region during the breeding season, and extending into lower pinyon–juniper woodlands during winter. Present and probably breeding in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Forested mountain slopes that provide snow-free areas for nesting on or near the ground, and which also offer sources of berries for food, are favored for nesting. In the winter the birds feed almost entirely on juniper or similar kinds of berries, but while breeding the usual thrush diet of insects is the most important source of food.

Seasonality: Essentially resident throughout the region, although there are marked seasonal movements into lower canyons or prairie areas where winter foods are available. Colorado egg records are from May 16 to July 10, and in Montana active nest records extend from June 2 to July 23.

Comments: This is one of the most unusual of thrushes, partly because of its flycatcher-like manner of catching insects, and partly because of its close association with berries (juniper berries in this region) during the winter months. It is also of interest for its beautiful territorial song, which is sometimes uttered in flight, and is followed by a plunging flight back to earth.

Suggested Reading: Dawson, 1919; Lederer, 1977; Salomonson & Balda, 1977.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	s	
s	r	S	S
R	R	R	r

R	R	r	r
s	R	R	M
s	R	R	R



Veery (Catharus fuscescens)

Identification: This forest-dwelling thrush is rather uniformly rusty brown on the underparts, mostly whitish below, with indistinct breast spotting and with a buffy eye-ring. It is quite similar to the hermit thrush, but is less distinctly spotted on the breast and is less olive-colored on the back. Its song is a distinctive series of fluty *veery* notes that gradually descend the scale.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	s	s
s	s	S	s
S	S	S	s

S	S	S	s
s	S	S	M
s	s	M	

M	s	s	M
M	s	S	s
	S	S	s



Status: Widespread in wooded areas of the region, especially near water. Variably common in the montane parks, becoming less common in the northern ones, and also rather rare in Rocky Mountain N.P.

Habitats and Ecology: In this region the favored habitats consist of wooded river valleys and canyons that range from deciduous gallery forests along prairie areas of Alberta, through aspen forests of the foothills, and willow-lined mountain streams up to about 8,000 feet at the southern end of the region. Areas with heavy and thickety undergrowth that are difficult for humans to penetrate are this species' favorite habitats, and most of its foraging is done on the ground.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from May 7 to October 26, while Wyoming records are from May 6 to September 12, with migration peaks in May and August. In Montana and Alberta they are usually seen from early May to early September, with a few late records extending into late September or early October. There are rather few egg records, but some from Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana are from June 1 to 13.

Comments: This is one of the finest singers of the western thrushes, and its liquid song reminds some of a ball bearing rolling down a funnel. Their nests are usually well hidden at or near ground level, but in spite of this are often found by and parasitized by brown-headed cowbirds.

Suggested Reading: Bertin, 1977; Day, 1953; Dilger, 1956.

Gray-cheeked Thrush (Catharus minimus)

Identification: This forest-dwelling thrush is dull-colored, without any rusty tones, and with a head that is mostly grayish brown, without definite pale eye-ring markings. The breast is heavily spotted, very much like that of the Swainson's thrush, and its song is somewhat similar as well, but is a descending series of wee-a notes that sometimes rises sharply at the end.

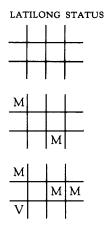
Status: A rare migrant in the region, primarily east of the mountains. Reported as a summer vagrant at Banff N.P.; the nearest known breeding areas are extreme northern Saskatchewan or possibly northern Alberta.

Habitats and Ecology: In our region these birds are likely to be seen foraging on or near the ground in almost any dense woodland, but their breeding habitats are typically scrub willows, alders, and dwarf birches near arctic timberline. While on migration the birds are often seen in association with Swainson's thrushes or other forest thrushes; at this time they are relatively quiet and elusive, as they move about through the shaded woodland floor searching for ground-dwelling insects and worms.

Seasonality: There are few records for this region, but during migration the birds are likely to be present at the same time as such commoner species as the Swainson's thrush and hermit thrush.

Comments: Although this species breeds all the way to the Bering coast of western Alaska, its migration route is almost exclusively east of the continental divide, and thus it is of only accidental occurrence in Idaho and western Colorado.

Suggested Reading: Bent, 1968; Wallace, 1939.





Swainson's Thrush (Catharus ustulatus)

Identification: This forest-adapted thrush is another ground-foraging species similar to the preceding one, but has a more buffy-colored face, with a definite buffy eye-ring, and with a rather buffy-toned breast with darker brown spotting. At least in this region the back coloration lacks any rusty tones such as occur in the veery and hermit thrush. The usual song is a spiralling series of whistles ascending in pitch, just the opposite of a veery's.

LATILONG STATUS

s	s	S	
s	S	S	S
S	S	S	s

S	S	s	s
s	S	S	
S	S	s	М

s		s	s
	s	Ņ	M
M	s	s	S



Status: Widespread during summer through the forested areas of the region, and relatively common in the montane parks, probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: On migration these birds are likely to be found in almost any fairly dense woodlands, but during the breeding season the birds are likely to be found at higher and cooler elevations, where shaded canyons occur but where there are also fairly large areas of tangled brushy undergrowth, permitting ground-level foraging. Riparian thickets, often of willows or alders, and moist mountain slopes supporting aspens, are usually used for nesting in this region.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from April 29 to October 29, with a few winter records. Wyoming records are from May 9 to October 20, with peaks in May and September. In Alberta the birds usually arrive the second week of May, and are generally gone by the end of October. Colorado egg records are from June 22 to August 1, and in Montana and Alberta there are egg records from mid-June onward, and recently fledged young observed from mid- to late July.

Comments: This is one of the commonest of the forest thrushes of the region, and it is somewhat more arboreal than the other *Catharus* thrushes. Likewise the nests are usually elevated from 2 to 20 feet above ground, and are often placed in rather small trees near water.

Suggested Reading: Morse, 1972; Sealy, 1974; Dilger, 1956.

Hermit Thrush (Catharus guttatus)

Identification: Hermit thrushes are perhaps best identified by their relatively rusty tails, which contrast with relatively non-rusty back coloration. They also have heavily spotted breasts, and fairly conspicuous pale buffy eye-rings. Their song is complex and varied; a fluty series of phrases that are often repeated; typically it consists of three phrases with long pauses between each phrase and with each phrase considerably higher in pitch than the one before.

Status: A summer resident in wooded areas almost throughout the region; present in all the montane parks and probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: Moist woodlands, especially of coniferous or mixed hardwoods and conifers, are preferred for breeding. Spruces, ponderosa pines, and higher zones of coniferous forests almost all the way to timberline are sometimes used. Shady and leaf-littered forest floors are favored for foraging, and in some areas the altitudinal range of breeding spans several thousands of feet.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from May 2 to November 11, and in Wyoming the range is from April 19 to November 27, with migration peaks in May and October. In Montana and southern Alberta the birds arrive late April or early May, and they sometimes remain until early October. Colorado egg records are from May 14 to July 11, while in Montana egg records extend to July 16.

Comments: The hermit thrush is much more often heard than seen, but nevertheless the species' magnificent song is likely to be more memorable than a fleeting sight of a fleeting bird. Nests are typically on the ground, nearly sunk out of sight in deep mosses, but sometimes also are placed on the lower limbs of trees.

Suggested Reading: Bent, 1965; Pettingill, 1930; Morse, 1972; Sealy, 1974.

LATILONG STATUS

s	s	s	
	s	s	M
S	s	S	s

s	s	s	s
s	S	s	
	S	S	S

s	s	S	s
S	s	S	S
S	S	s	S



American Robin (Turdus migratorius)

Identification: This is such a familiar bird that description of the adult seems superfluous, but juveniles are heavily spotted on the breast and somewhat resemble other thrushes, and western birds are generally duller than those from more eastern parts of the continent. The song, a repeated cheerio of about three or four phrases that may be repeated several times, is fairly distinctive.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	S	s
S	R	S	S
R	R	R	S

R	R	S	R
S	R	R	R
R	R	R	R

R	R	R	R
M	R	R	R
R	R	R	R



Status: Widespread throughout the entire region, especially in open woodland areas. Fairly common to abundant in all the montane parks, and breeding in all.

Habitats and Ecology: Open woodlands, whether natural or artificial, such as suburbs, city parks, farmsteads, etc., are typical habitats, but the birds tend to occur almost anywhere there are at least scattered trees and soft ground suitable for probing for insects and worms, and where mud can be gathered for the nest. Nesting on human-made structures seems to be preferred over natural nest sites such as trees, at least in protected areas.

Seasonality: Resident as far north as Colorado, but with seasonal movements evident. In Wyoming migrations are evident in April and again in September or October, while in Montana the range of records is from February to November. In Alberta April and September are also major months of migration, with a few birds sometimes attempting to overwinter. Colorado egg records are from May 15 to July 5, and in Wyoming there are egg records from May 10 to mid-July. In Montana nestlings have been noted from late May to mid-August.

Suggested Reading: Howell, 1942; Bent, 1949.

Varied Thrush (Ixoreus naevius)

Identification: This thrush is nearly the same size and shape as the American robin, and the adult male has a somewhat similar rusty red breast, but the rusty area is divided by a black band, and there is also a rusty eye-stripe and rusty wing-bars. Females are much duller in appearance, but show the same general patterning as the male, except for a much fainter dark breast band. The song is an unusual series of phrases on different pitches, with rapid trills that tend to be loudest in the middle, and with definite pauses between the phrases.

Status: A permanent or summer resident in northern and western portions of the region, south to about west-central Montana. A common breeder in the montane parks as far south as Glacier N.P., but only a vagrant farther south.

Habitats and Ecology: In this region the varied thrush is associated with mature coniferous forests, especially rather wet forests that have completely shaded floors and a relatively open understory vegetation that permits ground foraging. In the winter the birds turn to berries and fruits such as those of mountain ash and Russian olive, as well as frozen apples.

Seasonality: A permanent resident as far north as southern Idaho, and an early migrant elsewhere, with birds usually arriving in mid- or northern Idaho in mid-March, and remaining until late October. Hatched young have been seen in Idaho as early as May 26, and eggs reported as late as August 7. Active nests have been noted in Montana as early as mid-June, and fledged young as early as June 25.

Suggested Reading: Martin, 1970; Bent, 1968.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	R	
s	s	s	M
S	s	s	M

M		M
	V	
	V	





Gray Catbird (Dumatella carolinensis)

Identification: This mostly grayish bird has a blackish cap and dark reddish brown under tail coverts. It has a distinctive cat-like *meow* call, and often flicks its tail. It is usually found close to heavy cover. Its song is a highly variable mixture of squeaky notes, nasal sounds, and more melodious phrases.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	s	s
s	S	s	s
s	S	S	S

S	S	s	S
s	S	S	S
	•	S	S

s	s	S	M
s	s	M	S
M	S	S	S



Status: Present in wooded habitats nearly throughout the entire region, but rarer to the north, and absent or only a vagrant in the Alberta montane parks. Breeding probably occurs in all the U.S. montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Dense thickets, ranging from riverine forests or prairie coulees, city parks and suburbs, orchards, woodland edges, shrubby marsh borders, and similar overgrown areas that provide a combination of dense vegetation and "edge" situations are the ideal habitats of this species. Coniferous forests are avoided, although aspen groves are used, as are other natural vegetational habitats that offer rich sources of insects and berries.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from May 8 to November 13, while Wyoming records are from May 11 to October 2. In Montana and southern Alberta the birds usually arrive in late May and leave in September. Colorado egg records are from June 9 to July 3, and those from Wyoming are from June 5 to 30. In Montana active nests have been seen as late as the end of July.

Comments: A member of the "mimic-thrush" group, this species sometimes incorporates the songs of other species into its songs, although not to the extent true of the mockingbird.

Suggested Reading: Harcus, 1973; Laskey, 1962; Adkisson, 1966.

Northern Mockingbird (Mimus polyglottos)

Identification: This species is mostly grayish above and white below, with white outer tail feathers and white wing patches that flash in flight. Flying birds sometimes closely resemble shrikes, but shrikes always have black facial masks that mockingbirds lack. In spring, the complex song of the male, that usually imitates those of other species, and usually consists of phrases that are repeated several times, is fairly distinctive.

Status: A local permanent resident in northern Colorado and a highly local and infrequent breeder in eastern Alberta; in other areas a migrant or vagrant, primarily east of the mountains. Absent from the montane parks except for Rocky Mountain N.P., where it is a vagrant. Local and irregular in southern Alberta, which is substantially north of its primary breeding range.

Seasonality: A local permanent resident in Colorado, and farther north variably migratory, with Wyoming records from April 30 to November 17, and migration peaks in May and September. Too irregular farther north to judge seasonally.

Comments: This is essentially a southern species which has extended its range considerably in recent decades, perhaps in part because of its attraction to human habitations and associated protection and feeding. The species is highly territorial, and its loud and persistent singing during the breeding season is a reflection of this fact.

Suggested Reading: Michener & Michener, 1935; Laskey, 1962; Adkisson, 1966.



Sage Thrasher (Oreoscoptes montanus)

Identification: This species is rarely seen far from sagebrush habitats, and in that environment it is unique in its heavily spotted white breast, its pale wing-bars, and its yellowish eyes. In shape and color it is rather thrush-like, but lacks rusty tones, and has a white-cornered tail. The song is a prolonged series of warbling phrases.

LATILONG STATUS

	М		
		M	
V	M	M	s

S	s	s	s
s	S	S	S
S	S	s	S

s	s	s	S
S	S	S	S
S	S	S	S



Status: A local summer resident in sagebrush habitats almost throughout the region, north as far as north-central Montana. Largely limited to lower altitudes, and absent or rare in the montane parks except Rocky Mountain N.P., where uncommon and not known to breed, and Yellowstone N.P., where a rare breeder.

Habitats and Ecology: This species is closely associated with sage-dominated grasslands and to a much lesser extent other shrublands dominated by shrubs of similar growth-forms such as rabbit-brush and greasewood. Most foraging is done on the ground, but nesting is done in the shrubs. A greater array of shrublands is used in other seasons.

Seasonality: Colorado records are from April 1 to October 24, while Wyoming records extend from March 25 to October 3, with peaks in April and September. Wyoming egg records are from May 17 to mid-July, and in Colorado nestlings have been observed as early as May 13.

Comments: The little that has been written on this species suggests that it is much like the other North American thrashers, with pairs sometimes remaining mated during successive years, and showing a high level of territorial activities.

Suggested Reading: Reynolds & Rich, 1978; Killpack, 1970; Bent, 1948.

Brown Thrasher (Toxostoma rufum)

Identification: This fox-colored bird resembles a long-tailed and slimbodied thrush, which is heavily streaked with dark brown below. It is usually found in woodland edge situations, in similar habitats to those of gray catbirds, and its song is somewhat like that of the catbird, but is more melodious and varied, the phrases usually being repeated several times in mockingbird-fashion.

Status: A local summer resident east of the mountains throughout the entire region; present in the montane parks only as rare migrants or vagrants.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open, brushy woodlands, scattered clumps of woodland in open environments, shelterbelts, woodlots, and shrubby residential areas. In prairie areas the birds are mostly confined to shrubby coulees or to riparian forests that provide sources of berries as well as foraging locations in open grasslands.

Seasonality: Winters regularly as far north as Colorado, and occasionally to Wyoming, where most records are from February 3 to September. In Montana and Alberta the birds typically arrive in May, and most are gone by September. Colorado egg dates are from May 13 to July 31, while egg and nest records for Wyoming and Colorado are for June.

Comments: Catbirds and brown thrashers have very similar territorial requirements, and these birds often fight over territories, with the larger thrashers usually evicting the catbirds. At least in some areas the birds are regularly double-brooded, with the birds sometimes changing mates between broods.

Suggested Reading: Erwin, 1935; Bent, 1948.

LATILONG STATUS

	?
V	s
V	

	s	S
		S
		S

	s	s
M	М	S
s	M	S



Water Pipit (Anthus spinoletta)

Identification: Like the following species, this is a ground-dwelling, brownish bird that somewhat resembles a large sparrow, but has a much sharper and weaker bill. Both species have white-edged tails and somewhat spotted breasts, but the water pipit has a more uniformly dark back plumage and an unstreaked crown. A *pip-it* call is often uttered in flight.

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s	s	S	М
M	M	M	M
S	s	S	M

S	S	S	М
S	S	S	
М	S	S	М

s		M	М
M	M	S	М
M	S	S	S



Status: A breeding summer resident in high montane areas over much of the region, and present on open grasslands or beaches during migration. Present in all the montane parks and probably breeding in all.

Habitats and Ecology: During the breeding season this species is found on alpine tundra and high meadows, while at other seasons it occurs on similar very open terrain, usually with only sparse vegetation, and often a moist substrate. Shorelines, flooded fields, river edges, and similar habitats are commonly used by migrants or wintering birds.

Seasonality: In Colorado some birds regularly winter on the plains, while Wyoming records are from March 22 to November 6, with peaks in April or May and October. By mid-April the birds have arrived in Montana and southern Alberta, and they usually remain in those regions until early October. Colorado egg records are from June 22 to July 23, while Wyoming egg records are from June 15 to July 13. Active nests in Montana have been noted from July 4 to August 18.

Comments: In Colorado, nests of water pipits have been noted at elevations of from 11,500 to 14,000 feet, making it one of the highest nesters of all of the region's birds. At these elevations the breeding season is very short, and the families begin to move to lower elevations shortly after the young have fledged.

Suggested Reading: Pickwell, 1947; Verbeck, 1970.

Sprague's Pipit (Anthus spraguei)

Identification: Very similar to the preceding species, but closely associated with prairie grasslands, and with a distinctly striped crown and a buff-streaked back that appears rather scaly in pattern. A flight song is uttered on the breeding ground that is highly musical and descending in pitch, and is frequently repeated.

Status: A summer resident on native grasslands east of the mountains in Alberta and Montana, and a rather rare migrant in plains areas farther south. Absent or at most a rare vagrant in the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated during the breeding season with native grasslands of only short to moderate stature. Breeding also occurs in alkaline meadows and around the edges of alkaline lakes. Outside the breeding season the birds are also associated with grassy habitats.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 17 to September 20, and Montana records extend from early May to late August. Nests in Montana have been seen from May 29 to July, and in North Dakota egg dates range from June 7 to 30, but nestlings have been observed as late as August 2.

Comments: This is one of the grassland endemics of central North America, and like many grassland species it has a spectacular song-flight display that helps to compensate for a generally inconspicuous plumage pattern. During aerial display the white outer tail feathers are spread conspicuously, and the bird flies in a circular manner around its territory in full song.

Suggested Reading: Bent, 1950.

LATILONG STATUS

	s	s
M		S

s	?	s	
		M	
	М	М	



