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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Turdidae (Thrushes, Bluebirds, and Solitaires)

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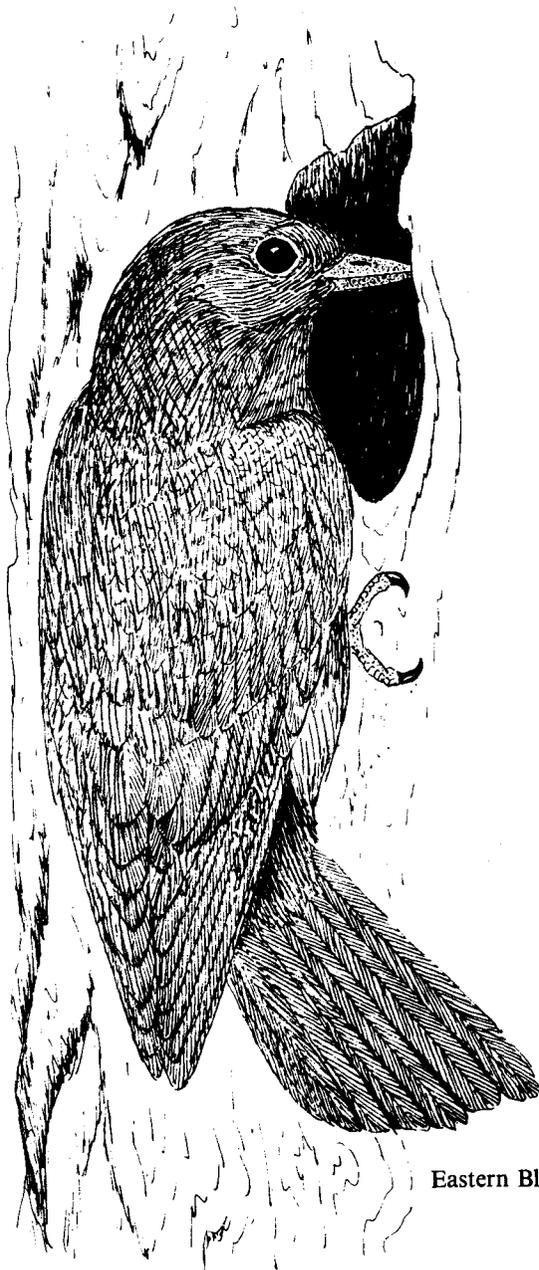
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FAMILY TURDIDAE
(THRUSHES, BLUEBIRDS,
AND SOLITAIRES)



Eastern Bluebird

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*

Breeding Status: Almost pandemic, but becoming rarer to the west and southwest, and increasingly limited there to urban areas. There seem to be no breeding records for northeastern New Mexico south of the Cimarron River Valley, the Oklahoma panhandle west of Beaver County, or for the Texas panhandle outside the Red River Valley.

Breeding Habitat: The original habitat was probably open woods, but now the species is most common in cities, suburbs, parks and gardens, and farmlands.

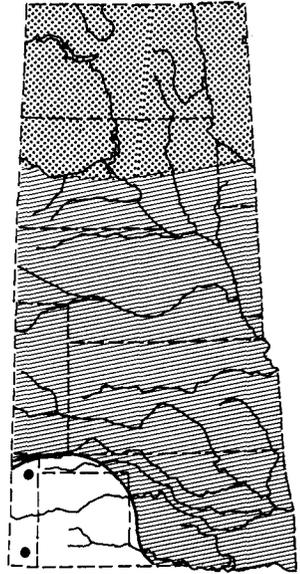
Nest Location: Nests are in tree forks, on horizontal branches, in shrubs, or on horizontal ledges of buildings, rarely more than 30 feet above the ground and usually 5–15 feet. They are constructed of mud into which grass and other vegetation has been worked while the mud is still wet, and are lined with fine grasses.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 6 eggs (8 North Dakota clutches averaged 3.9; 57 Kansas clutches averaged 3.6). The eggs are uniformly blue green. The incubation period is 12–14 days. Multiple-brooded.

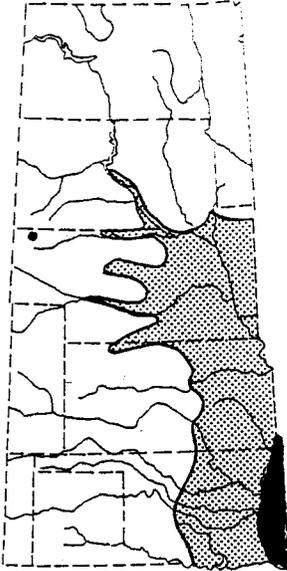
Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates range from April 23 to June 30, with nestlings seen from May 8 to July 15. In Kansas, egg dates are from April 1 to July 20, with about half the eggs laid between April 11 to 30. Full clutches have been found in Oklahoma as early as March 23, and nestlings have been seen as late as August 24.

Breeding Biology: A very early spring migrant, male robins tend to arrive on the breeding grounds slightly before females, and both sexes tend to return to the area where they were hatched. Males often establish essentially the same territory they held the previous year; the size of the territory seems to vary greatly with habitat and population density. The time clutches are begun is closely associated with latitude, and both sexes apparently help select the nest-site. The nest is sometimes completed in as little as 24 hours, with the male carrying much of the material and the female doing the shaping. However, most nests are built much more slowly, especially early ones, which often require 5–6 days. The eggs are laid at daily intervals, and incubation is done almost exclusively by the female. The fledging period is usually about 13 days, but varies from 9 to 16 days, and the young are cared for until they are about a month old. Even at the northern edge of its range the robin typically raises two broods, and pairs normally remain intact for the second brood. At times the same nest is used for the second clutch, but often a new one is constructed nearby.

Suggested Reading: Howell 1942; Bent 1949.



Wood Thrush *Hylocichla mustelina*



Breeding Status: Breeds from west-central Minnesota (hypothetical breeder in extreme eastern North Dakota) southward through Iowa and eastern South Dakota, eastern Nebraska (west probably to Cherry, Lincoln, and Thomas counties, *Nebraska Bird Review* 34:18), eastern Kansas (west to Decatur and Edwards counties), and eastern Oklahoma (west to Kay, Oklahoma, and Murray counties).

Breeding Habitat: Associated with mature, shady forests, especially deciduous woods, and secondarily with wooded parks or gardens. Like veeries, wood thrushes prefer habitats with wet ground, running water nearby, and a dense understory, but apparently they also need tall trees for song perches.

Nest Location: Nests are usually 5-15 feet above the ground, rarely up to 50 feet, on a low horizontal fork or in a crotch of a tree. The nest is very similar to that of a robin but is somewhat smaller (less than 6 inches in diameter) and has a lining of leaves and rootlets rather than grass. Nests are typically well shaded from above and are well concealed.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 2 to 4 blue or greenish blue eggs (9 Kansas clutches averaged 3.4). The incubation period is 13 days. Frequently double-brooded.

Time of Nesting: Egg dates in Kansas are from May 11 to August 10, with most eggs laid between May 21 and June 10. Egg dates in Oklahoma are from April 28 to July 21, and in Texas they are from April 29 to May 2.

Breeding Biology: Wood thrush males become territorial and obtain mates within a few days after they arrive on the breeding grounds; sometimes they are mated within a day after arrival, possibly to mates of the previous year. Although the male is able to influence the choice of a nesting site by calling or even incipient nest-building, the female makes the final choice and does the actual building. About 6 days are spent in nest-building; during that time sexual chases are frequent and copulation attempts are common. The first egg is laid 1-3 days after the nest is finished, and thereafter eggs are laid each day until the clutch is complete. Only the female incubates, but the male stands near the nest when his mate is absent. Both parents feed the nestlings, which fledge in 12-14 days. Thereafter both parents protect and feed the young for another 10-15 days, and typically a second clutch is begun soon afterward. New nests are constructed for the second nesting, usually somewhat lower than for the initial nesting effort. There is no evidence of mate-changing between broods.

Suggested Reading: Nolan 1974; Brackbill 1958.

Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*

Breeding Status: Breeds regularly in forests of north-central Minnesota (Clearwater and Roseau counties) and rarely in the Black Hills of South Dakota (*Wilson Bulletin* 78:321).

Breeding Habitat: Coniferous or mixed forests, especially shady, moist woods, are the favored habitat.

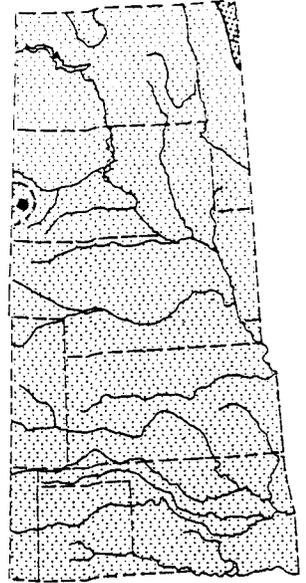
Nest Location: Nests are usually on the ground, well sunk in moss, but they may also be in the lower limbs of conifers. They are built of twigs, bark, grasses, and mosses and lined with materials such as grasses, mosses, and pine needles. In Colorado, nests are usually 3–10 feet above the ground, in spruces, and are close to a stream or spring.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 4 very pale blue eggs, which rarely have a few spots. The incubation period is 12 days. Probably single-brooded but known to renest after nest failure.

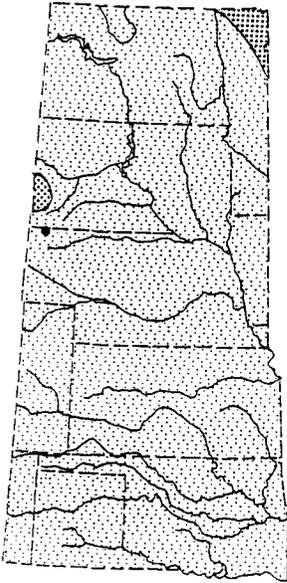
Time of Breeding: Minnesota egg records are from May 30 to July 10, and nestlings have been reported as early as June 18. The Black Hills record was of a nest with eggs being incubated on June 19. Colorado egg records are from June 11 to July 5, with nestlings seen as late as August 3.

Breeding Biology: This is the first of the thrushes to arrive in northern areas in the spring and the last to depart in fall, a reflection of its adaptation to boreal nesting. It also is perhaps the most famous songster; sometimes its beautiful and complex song can even be heard in wintering areas, although it does not sing during migration. So far as is known, only the female incubates the eggs, but the male regularly feeds her while she is sitting. Additionally, he spends a good deal of time guarding the nesting territory, often standing on a sentinel post about 40 feet away from the nest itself. Both parents actively feed the young, which spend an average of 12 days in the nest. In the eastern states the range of egg dates, extending over about 3 months, is suggestive of double-brooding, but in Colorado and other areas of the region under consideration there seems to be no evidence of double-brooding.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1949; Bailey and Niedrach 1965.



Swainson Thrush
Catharus ustulatus



Breeding Status: Breeds in north-central Minnesota (Clearwater and Kittson counties) and is a hypothetical breeder in northeastern North Dakota. It is a common breeding species in the Black Hills of South Dakota and probably breeds regularly in adjacent northwestern Nebraska (one breeding record, Dawes County, *Nebraska Bird Review* 42:17).

Breeding Habitat: The species breeds in coniferous and occasionally in mixed forests in both South Dakota and Minnesota. In the Black Hills it is found in the higher, cooler spruce forests rather than in pines. Heavily shaded coniferous forests with brooks or springs and with a relatively open undergrowth allowing foraging on the forest floor are the favored areas.

Nest Location: Nests are usually in small trees, typically conifers, 2–20 feet above the ground, on horizontal branches near the main trunk. The nest is constructed of twigs, bark, leaves, mosses, and the like and lined with such things as lichens, fur, and fine strips of bark.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs, usually 3 or 4. The eggs are pale blue, with brown spotting around the larger end. The incubation period is 12–13 days. Probably single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: Minnesota egg records are from June 18 to July 2, and nestlings have been seen as early as June 24. The nesting season in the Black Hills is probably during June; nests or females ready to lay have been noted in early June, and dependent young have been observed in mid-July.

Breeding Biology: This species is the most arboreal of the North American *Catharus* thrushes, and the birds spend much of their time foraging in the foliage and catching flies. Territorial males sing a distinctive song that consists of almost continuous melodic phases that seem to spiral upward. Nests are built over a period of about 4 days, and eggs are laid daily. Apparently only the female incubates, and only she broods the young. They are fed by both parents and leave the nest 10–12 days after hatching. Unlike hermit thrushes, males of this species frequently begin to sing while still migrating, and on a territory they may average nearly 10 songs a minute, or more than 4,000 songs a day, from about 3:15 A.M. to 7:30 P.M.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1949; Dilger 1956.

Veery

Catharus fuscescens

Breeding Status: Breeds over nearly all the wooded portions of northern and western Minnesota westward through comparable habitats of North Dakota to the Missouri and Little Missouri valleys. It is also a breeder in the Black Hills (especially Spearfish Canyon), as well as locally in northeastern South Dakota (Faulk and Spink counties).

Breeding Habitat: Moist deciduous or coniferous forests, river-bottom forests, moist wooded canyons or ravines, and tamarack swamps are favored. Sites with wet ground, nearby running water, and well-developed understories are especially preferred.

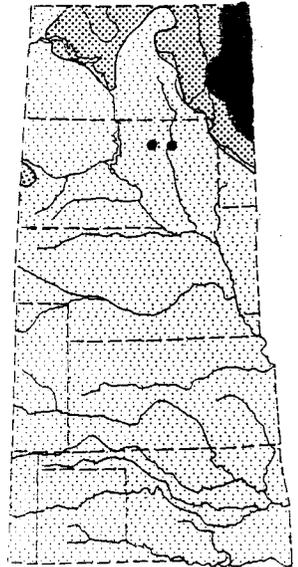
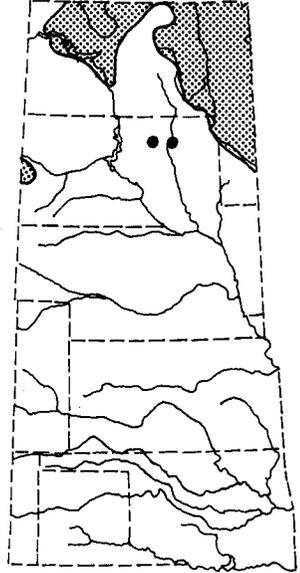
Nest Location: Nests are on the ground or in a low shrub, on a stump, in tangled vines, and in similar sites. Often the nest is sunk into the top of a mossy hummock, and it consists of twigs, bark, grasses, and moss, well concealed by surrounding vegetation. It is lined with grasses and rootlets; no mud is used.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs, usually 4 (4 North Dakota clutches averaged 4.2). The eggs are pale blue, usually unspotted. The incubation period is 11-12 days. Single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates are from June 6 to June 15, but the probable breeding season extends from late May to late July. Minnesota egg dates are from May 24 to July 10, and nestlings have been reported as early as June 11.

Breeding Biology: Like the other North American *Hylocichla* and *Catharus* thrushes, males arrive in breeding areas before females and establish territories that they advertise by singing. When females arrive they intrude on these territories, and they are initially chased by the resident males, presumably because there are no plumage differences between the sexes in these species. When females are chased, they tend to remain in the male's territory, flying in circles. Ultimately the male accepts the female's presence and a pair bond is formed. Nest-building requires 6-10 days, and a clutch is begun soon thereafter. Although the male is strongly defensive of the nest, only the female incubates. The fledging period is 11-12 days, but the adults feed the young for some time thereafter. Veeries are frequently parasitized by cowbirds in spite of their well-concealed nests, and they typically accept the cowbird eggs.

Suggested Reading: Dilger 1956; Day 1953.



Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*



Breeding Status: Breeds throughout Minnesota, in North and South Dakota (west locally to their western borders), in eastern Nebraska (west locally to Dawes and Deuel counties), in eastern Colorado along the major river valleys, in eastern Kansas (rare and local west of Comanche County), in Oklahoma west to the panhandle, and in the eastern panhandle of Texas.

Breeding Habitat: The species frequents open deciduous woods, especially where interspersed with or adjacent to grasslands. Upland and floodplain forest edges, city parks and gardens, shelterbelts, and farmsteads are all commonly used.

Nest Location: Nests are typically in old woodpecker holes or natural cavities of dead trees, dead limbs, or utility poles. In many areas birdhouses are used, especially where natural cavities are lacking. Nest boxes that are placed in open areas, 8 to 12 feet high, with entrances no larger than 1½ inches in diameter, are preferred by bluebirds. There should be a suitable tree perch with a view of the nest entrance, and if possible nests should face east or south, to avoid exposure to the westerly spring rains common to the Great Plains. The cavity is filled with weed stalks and grasses to form a loose cup, sometimes with a lining of finer grasses or a few feathers.



Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 6 pale bluish eggs (276 clutches from Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota averaged 4.5). The incubation period is 12–18 days, which is surprisingly variable. Double-brooded in much of its range, with single-brooding usual in Canada and triple-brooding present in some areas.

Time of Breeding: Egg dates in North Dakota are from June 3 to July 22, and in Kansas they extend from April 1 to July 20, with first clutches peaking in late April and second clutches in early June. Oklahoma egg dates are March 27 to July 31.

Breeding Biology: Studies in Arkansas, where bluebirds are mostly permanent residents, indicate that wintering birds form pair bonds between November and the end of January, and courtship is closely associated with the visiting of nest boxes or other suitable nest cavities. Once pair bonds are established they seem to last throughout the year. A territory is established around a nesting site and is retained until the last brood fledges. Courtship feeding of the female by her mate is an important part of breeding activities; this starts before nest-building and continues into the nestling stage. Only females incubate, but males sometimes enter the nest box briefly when their mates are absent. The nestling period is usually 17–18 days, and at least in Arkansas

there are commonly three nesting attempts, sometimes as many as four, and up to three broods are reared.

Suggested Reading: Thomas 1946; Hartshorn 1962.

Mountain Bluebird *Sialia currucoides*

Breeding Status: Breeds in western North Dakota (east locally to the Souris River and Turtle Mountains), in the western third of South Dakota, (primarily the Black Hills), the western third of Nebraska (particularly the Pine Ridge area of Sioux to Sheridan counties and the Wildcat Hills of Banner County), and presumably eastern Colorado (no specific nest records for the region under consideration). There is one recent nesting record for Harmon County, Oklahoma, and some early records for Cimarron County. The only evidence for possible breeding in Kansas is a full-grown juvenile collected in 1911 in Hamilton County. There are no definite breeding records for the Texas panhandle or adjacent northeastern New Mexico.

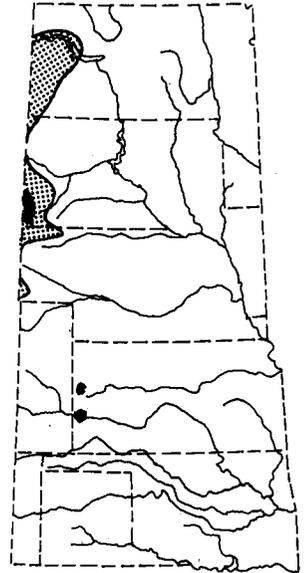
Breeding Habitat: The species favors open woodlands, especially open stands of pine, pine forest edges, burned or cutover areas, and aspen clumps in open country.

Nest Location: Nests are in old woodpecker holes or other natural tree cavities, especially in aspens. The birds use cavities in both live and dead trees, as well as nest boxes and sometimes also cliff crevices. The openings are usually 4-10 feet above the ground, and the nest is built of whatever vegetation is locally available. Openings in nest boxes should be 1¾ inches across, since this species is slightly larger than the eastern bluebird.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 4 to 8 pale blue or bluish white eggs. The incubation period is 13 days. Frequently double-brooded.

Time of Breeding: In North Dakota the probable breeding season is from early May to early August, with eggs reported as late as June 24. Nesting in South Dakota extends from early May through July, with nest-building reported as early as April 4 and nestlings seen from May 27 to August 5.

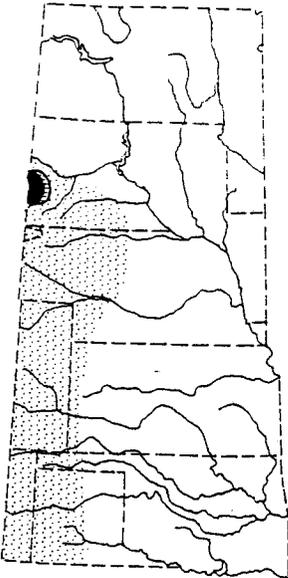
Breeding Biology: Bluebirds arrive relatively early in the central and northern plains and immediately begin searching for nesting sites. Paired birds often displace unmated males, which defend their territories only weakly, and when a nesting pair has established a territory they both defend it vigorously, the male defend-



ing the periphery and the female the actual nest site. One instance has been described of a male having two mates within his territory, nesting about 50 yards apart. Only the female builds the nest, which requires 4-6 days, and only the female incubates. Females brood their nestlings for about 6 days after hatching, and both parents actively feed the young. They fledge in 22-23 days, after which the female usually begins a second clutch and the male remains with the fledglings for about 10 days. Rarely, young of the first brood of mountain bluebirds have been observed feeding the second brood.

Suggested Reading: Power 1966; Haecker 1948.

Townsend Solitaire *Myadestes townsendi*



Breeding Status: Breeds commonly in the Black Hills of South Dakota and at least once bred in the pine forests of northwestern Nebraska (Sioux County). No breeding records for elsewhere in the region.

Breeding Habitat: In the Black Hills the species frequents pine and spruce forests and is generally found in rather dense montane forests, especially among conifers.

Nest Location: Nests are on the ground or close to it (rarely as high as 10 feet). The nest is usually well protected from above by overhanging vegetation or a rock and sunken into the earth or surrounded by roots that form a natural cavity. The nest is made of available materials and varies greatly in size to fit the cavity occupied; rarely, no actual nest is constructed, and the eggs rest on bare ground.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs, usually 4. The eggs are white with spots and blotches of varied sizes and colors. The incubation period is unreported.

Time of Breeding: In the Black Hills the birds probably nest from early May through June and probably July. An egg-laying female was collected in mid-May, and recently hatched young have been seen as early as June 2. In Colorado eggs have been found from the third week in May to the first of July, at elevations of 6,200 to about 12,000 feet.

Breeding Biology: This little-studied montane thrush in some respects acts more like a flycatcher. In the winter the birds move from the mountains to lower elevations. Thus, in California and Arizona it has been reported that the birds establish winter territories that they hold from late September until April and that are

associated with the distribution of juniper berries, their main winter food in those areas. Although they compete with jays and robins for these berries, they do not attempt to defend their territories against these larger birds, though they do attack juncos, bluebirds, and nuthatches. During the breeding season, the remarkably beautiful song of the territorial male is the species' most attractive feature, and it sings not only while perched but also while hovering high in the air, after which it makes a spectacular plunging flight back toward earth. Remarkably little is known of nest-building or incubation; neither the relative roles of the sexes nor the incubation and fledging periods have been determined. Both sexes help care for the young, and the range of available egg dates suggests that two broods may be raised in a season, but this is not yet established.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1949; Lederer 1977.

