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HYBRID BLUEBIRD UPDATE

The female Mountain Bluebird and male Eastern x Mountain Bluebird nesting in Dawes Co. (NBR 53:67) successfully fledged two broods, each with four young, in the summer of 1985. Young from the first nesting fledged in the last week of June. About 1 July the parents renested. Since the pair was observed copulating, it is highly probable that the hybrid male was the father of the young to be raised.

In mid-July the eggs hatched, but at this time the female became obviously ill. She sat on a fence with feathers ruffled and did not feed the young. Two or three days after hatching she disappeared. We believe she died, since birds are extremely reluctant to abandon a nest with small young. The male just flew his wings off feeding the babies all by himself, but he was successful. All four young fledged. The young from both nestings showed some warm brown in their underparts, perhaps hinting at their Eastern Bluebird ancestry. Interestingly, this fall (1985) a flock of about ten Eastern Bluebirds spent two days at this Pine Ridge location.

Hybridization between Eastern and Mountain Bluebirds has been reported several times. It has occurred when Mountain Bluebirds gradually displaced Easterns in Manitoba (21 cases reported in Rounds, R. C. and H. L. Munro, 1982, A review of hybridization between *Siala sialis* and *S. currucoides*, *Wilson Bull.* 94(2):219-223) and North Dakota (Gatz, T. R. and R. Kandall, 1981, A mated pair of Eastern and Mountain Blue Birds in North Dakota, *Prairie Naturalist* 13(1):31). It has also happened when Easterns have moved into Mountain Bluebird range in Nebraska's Pine Ridge (this report), and when a vagrant male Mountain Bluebird in Ontario remained all summer and mated (Weir, R. D. 1985, Ontario Region, *American Birds*, 39(3):291-296. Hybrids are fertile and readily mate with both parental species (Rounds and Munro, cited above).

Birders in Nebraska are aware of hybridization, since many closely related eastern and western forms (subspecies, species, whatever) meet in the state. Forms that interbreed extensively when they meet are considered members

of a single species, as are Bullock's and Baltimore Orioles. However, the hybridization reported so far in Bluebirds has occurred only when one species was far more common than the other, making it very difficult for an individual of the rare species to find a mate of its own species. Under such conditions even very distinct species may hybridize on occasion. This hybridization is probably especially likely in Bluebirds, since the factor limiting their nesting is often lack of suitable nest cavities. A male defending a good cavity is unlikely to go unmated.

Since male Bluebirds control nest cavities, one could hypothesize that if there is any difference male hybrids may be more successful at finding mates than are females. However, the rather small amount of evidence gathered so far does not support that idea. Of the 47 individual birds reported to be involved in 24 cross-species matings and backcrosses, six are male hybrids and three are female hybrids. This difference is not significant.

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