



Migratory Birds Commonly visit the Capay Valley --

some so regularly that they seem to be permanent residents, but truly are just passing through, stopping to feed on our lush farmlands and bugs--like those prolific Capay Valley Crickets!

This time, hobby-ornithologist Jim Hiatt brings us Bluebirds!

With our summer ending, fall finds many of our local birds leaving for Central America, such as our Western Kingbirds, but taking their place are Red Shafted Flickers warblers, Juncos, kinglets, and the delightful Meadow Larks coming in behind them during the Fall-into-Spring period. Another, somewhat magical and beautiful bird is the Blue Bird, our blue-feathered focus for this issue. This one is an almost uniquely lovely species that arrives here late fall into winter and stays for a time and we know it as the Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currocoides*).

We do have Western Bluebirds in mid-California, but they are normally a bird of higher elevation. I've seen them along Cache Creek and Bear Creek above Rumsey, and quite a number live along the Buck Island area there. We don't see these hereabouts, as they're primarily above 500 feet. But the Mountain Bluebird is nature's migratory gift here at somewhat lower elevations--and an extra special visual treat when the sun is just right in relation to them. Whether perched or airborne, they seem like winged jewels--little *winged sapphires*--and are, except for the Scrub Jay, really the only bluish bird we have in Western Yolo. Loveliest of all, they're here now!

I have been "shooting" these with my camera here for about 2 weeks now, having become appreciatively aware of their presence one day while on my way back from our south field. I had been on the dirt roads on a coyote hunt, driving the perimeter of our south field, and slowed down to see how many species of birds I could identify, when I was suddenly overjoyed to see these little beauties by the dozens! Reaction was, "Ohhh, geeeee, I had forgotten to look for these--now I wonder how long they've **been** here!? Let's see how easy these little ones are to get good pix of!!" In three days I snapped hundreds of what turned out to be pictures far better than I was hoping for! This was an unexpected Blessing, and deserves attention as a Christmas Gift to our readers--**Merry Christmas!**

These, surprisingly, are a member of the Robin/Thrush family, or *Turdidae*. And I tend to think of bluebirds as smaller than Robin-sized, but not so from my current experience and education. These have been such a treat to just watch and enjoy and learn from. In spending a goodly number of hours in a small pickup right next to our single Pistachio tree, I've gotten to know these such that it's been a more than rewarding experience. It takes patience; just sit for an hour and take them in...then do it again and again. The photos herein were for the most part taken within 10-15 feet. Staying in my pickup made it ideal, as I could move about in adjusting my position for capturing them with relative ease without disturbing them, as they didn't associate me apart from the vehicle--my own *bird blind*, if you will.

For those readers familiar with the "hover-hunting" method used by Sparrow Hawks (Kestrels), White-Tailed Kites, and even Rough-Legged Hawks, you'll notice right away that these Bluebirds use this as one of their key ways of feeding, as well. In flying across the field, they suddenly veer upward, and flap their wings in such a way as to keep themselves locked in position, whilst scanning the ground underneath and nearby for crickets--and this field is abundant in those this year! The bird may look around for 10 seconds or so, and finding nothing effort-worthy immediately, continue on a couple hundred feet, again "tip-up" and hover--then suddenly drop nearly straight down, and grab one! From there he will fly to a perch for dining, such as a the skeletal stalk of Mustard or another weed stalk--or as seen here, a fence or a tree, like my pistachio.



Crickets, according to good ol' Wikipedia, are: of the family *Gryllidae* (also known as "true crickets"), are insects somewhat related to grasshoppers, and more closely related to katydids or bush crickets (family *Tettigoniidae*)...They have somewhat flattened bodies and long antennae. There are more than 900 species of crickets. They tend to be nocturnal and are often confused with grasshoppers because they have a similar body structure including jumping hind legs. Crickets are harmless to humans--and Blue Birds love 'em!





or the fence-line nearby to *then* swallow it. I'm sure that the cricket's motion was part of the attraction, as I've read that with such avians as high-flying hawks or Buzzards, they actually have two lenses in their eyes, which they can move with respect to each other and thusly have the equivalent of a *zoom lens* feature, so they can cover a great deal of ground from a higher perspective. Perhaps the Bluebirds have something like that, as I watched them do seemingly the same thing, though I have not found confirmation of this

observation. I went to my trusty ***Birds of North America**** to learn more about their lifestyles, and found this winter visitor on the west side of the valley has a summer range on the western half of North America as far north as Alaska. Nesting is 2 broods per year, 5-6 eggs at a time, from May through July.

I do remember these lovelies from my youth, coming out here to see Grandma each Sunday. Always the birder, I'd see these blue jewels hover-hunting over these same fields. I knew what they were, just didn't pay as much as attention then. It's both amazing and a little humbling to suddenly discover, or in my case, rediscover, beauty that's always been here and is just waiting to be noticed!

The cricket is swallowed whole in almost a single convulsive motion. These birds have a peculiar action of seemingly *wiping* their beaks again and again sideways on a tree twig--almost napkin-like. There is often a second bodily convulsion as the cricket is still wiggling and not all the way down, yet. I had to shoot quickly, as these don't work their prey down slowly, as a snake does, but swallow the prey quickly.

As these birds are just passing through, I've learned to make it a point to just sit and watch and learn--and there is much to take in! They are not a shy bird, though they are a bird of the open field primarily, and not as much of your back yard, so not commonly seen--without a worthwhile effort.

The plumage is gorgeous. Males are a gentle sky-blue in the front from the head to the upper abdomen, and then whitish in the lower front. The wing and tail feathers are a deep, shiny-blue, and when seen just right in the sunlight, give a handsomely beautiful look to this bird in an area not normally known for spectacularly colored varieties. The female is just a fainter, somewhat duller-colored version of the male.

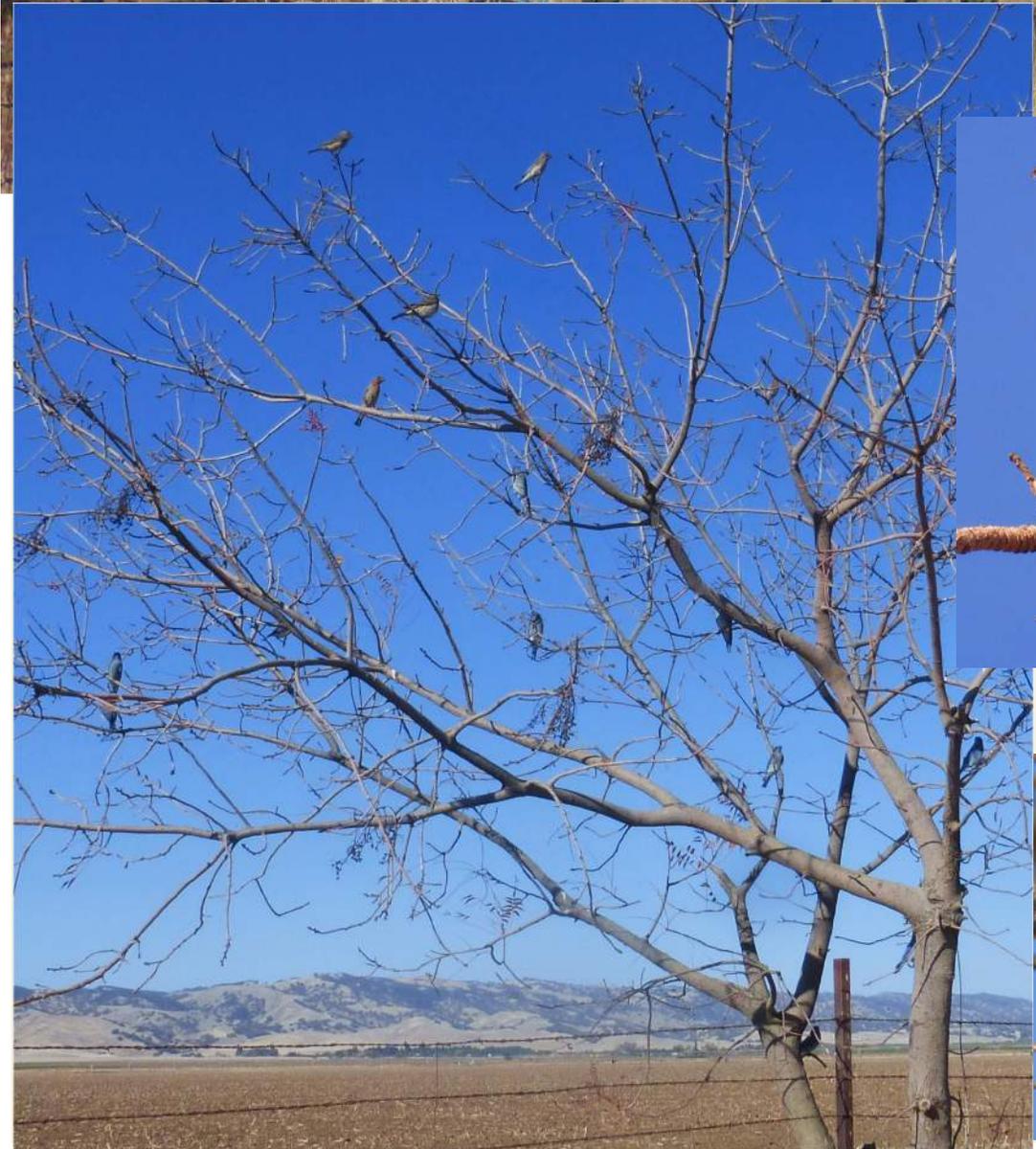
The ones I watched were almost uniformly silent for the first two sightings, and were not too interactive with each other. The little Pistachio tree I was positioned by did occasionally have as many as a dozen in it at any one time. Delightfully, my third sighting found them engaged in quiet, but rapid-fire twitterings and chatterings--and frequently chasing one another. And woe unto the one that is *seen* with a fresh *catch* in its mouth, but has not yet downed it! In spite of this, they were also very tolerant of other species engaged in the hunting of the same insects. In this way, I was able to capture a great many very nice photos of House Finches and a Meadowlark on one occasion. Sparrow Hawks were hunting the same field for the same insect-fare, but would only alight in the tree when I was at a distance more comfortable for them. The hawks would hover-hunt in the field for the same crickets, but further out. Their eyesight seems to be noteworthy, as these would suddenly leave the tree and fly out 50-70 feet, and right to a cricket between clods, snatch it up and return to the tree



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At left, on the fence & in the tree sit Bluebirds and House Finches, some about to land. Finch close-up below.



Below, even a Meadowlark joins in!

