

Sialia mexicana

English name western bluebird (Georgia Depression population)

Scientific name *Sialia mexicana*

Other scientific names none

Risk status

BC (Georgia Depression population): possibly extirpated (SHB, SZN); red-listed
Canada: unranked (N?)

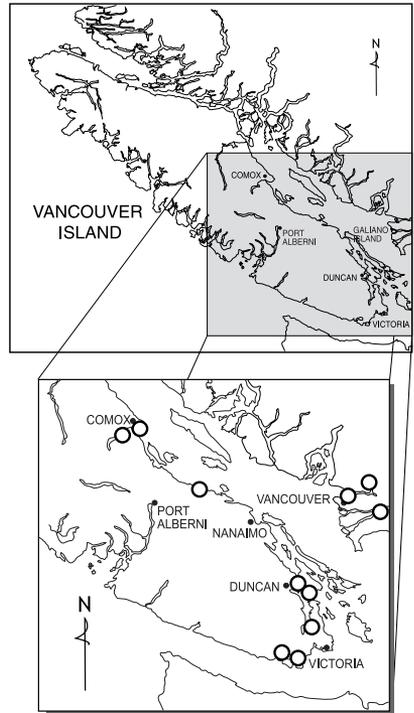
Global: not assessed (G5T?Q)

Elsewhere: Washington – vulnerable (S3B, SZN); Oregon – apparently secure (S4B, S4N).

Range/Known distribution

The western subspecies (*S. m. orientalis*) breeds across western North America from southwestern Canada to Baja California. In Washington and Oregon, coastal populations are presently restricted to localised areas of suitable habitat, particularly those with nest box programmes. Western bluebirds were once widely distributed across southern British Columbia and currently breed from the Okanagan to southwestern Alberta. The Georgia Depression population of the western bluebird is thought to be extirpated, with birds having disappeared from the Vancouver area in the 1970s, and no breeding pairs or transient birds recorded from southeastern Vancouver Island or the Gulf Islands since the mid-1990s. The species was strongly associated with Garry oak woodlands through most of coastal British Columbia.

Western bluebirds migrate short to medium distances from breeding areas, or may remain as year-round residents if winters are mild. In the Georgia Depression, they occasionally wintered near Vancouver, and between Comox and Victoria on Vancouver Island.



Distribution of *Sialia mexicana*

○ former breeding sites

Sialia mexicana

Field Description

6½"-7". A small- to medium-sized member of the thrush family. Male: **Deep purple-blue** on head, throat, wings and tail; belly paler blue. Breast and (usually) back are **rusty red**. Female: Paler and duller in colour, with a white eye-ring. Throat and belly grey, wings and tail light blue. **Breast shows a rusty wash**. Juveniles are speckle-breasted without any trace of red, but with some blue apparent in wings and tail.

Western bluebirds are often observed feeding from perches, where they hawk for insects or drop to the ground to seize their prey. They will also hover-forage, glean insects from vegetation, or pursue prey along the ground. Diet during the breeding season is comprised largely of insects and other invertebrates. Fruits and seeds are important foods in winter. In coastal areas, western bluebirds may forage for marine invertebrates in the intertidal zone.

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

Distinguished from mountain bluebirds (*S. currucoides*) by the rusty breast and back. Western bluebirds are also deeper blue in colour.



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Life history

Breeding birds form pairs within a week of arrival on their breeding territories. The nest is a woven cup constructed primarily of grasses and situated in a natural or man-made cavity. The nesting period in the Georgia Depression extended from mid-April to mid-August, although most clutches across the species' BC range are found between mid-May and late June. The majority of clutches contain five or six eggs, which are incubated by the female for 13-14 days. Nestlings, fed by both parents, fledge at about 20 days of age and are tended by the parents for another two to four weeks. The male takes over fledgling care if a second clutch is initiated by the female.

In the Georgia Depression, productivity and breeding success of western bluebirds were affected by direct competition for nest cavities with other birds such as violet-green swallows (*Tachycineta thalassina*), house wrens (*Troglodytes aedon*), house sparrows* (*Passer domesticus*) and European starlings* (*Sturnus vulgaris*).

Habitat

Western bluebirds prefer sparsely treed woodlands with open understories and scattered trees and snags. In the Georgia Depression, the species nested from 30-600 m elevation. Breeding habitat included Garry oak meadows, hill summits, logged or burned forest, and farms and pastures. Foraging occurred in Garry oak woodlands, open meadows or weedy fields, farmlands, logged or burned forest, and suitable beaches. The structural attributes of Garry oaks historically provided good nesting habitat for secondary cavity nesters such as western bluebirds. More recently, nest box programs in coastal British Columbia (southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands) and elsewhere were implemented in an attempt to halt population declines. Although local efforts were unsuccessful, the nest box programme at Fort Lewis (WA) has resulted in a dramatic local population recovery, and may provide insights for future restoration efforts in coastal British Columbia.

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Why the species is at risk

The Georgia Depression population of the western bluebird was strongly associated with Garry oak and associated ecosystems, but at least 95% of this habitat has been lost and the remainder is in decline. Fire suppression, in combination with proliferation of woody invasive shrubs such as Scotch broom* (*Cytisus scoparius*), has led to loss of open understories. Modern land management practices often entail removal of the dead standing trees that provide cavities for nesting birds. Competition with non-native cavity nesting birds has likely also played a role in the extirpation of western bluebirds from the region.

What you can do to help this species

Management practices should be tailored to the needs of the species and its habitat. Potential management tools will depend on the specific circumstances and may require experimentation prior to implementation. **Before taking any action, expert advice should be obtained, and no action taken without it. Please refer to the introductory section of this manual.**

It is possible that western bluebirds may re-colonise parts of coastal British Columbia, but taking interim steps to restore and maintain existing habitat will be critical to the success of re-population efforts. You can help achieve these goals by participating in general habitat restoration and protection efforts such as Scotch broom* removal, snag retention, and development of comprehensive Garry oak ecosystem recovery plans. Nest box programmes have been successful elsewhere and may also be successful here, but must be carefully planned first.

References

- Beauchesne, S.M., P. Chytyk and J.M. Cooper. 2002. Western Bluebird stewardship account for the Garry oak ecosystems of southwestern British Columbia. Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, Victoria, British Columbia.
- Guinan, J.A., P.A. Gowaty and E.K. Eltzroth. 2000. Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*). In: *The birds of North America*, No. 510 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

For further information, contact the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, or see the web site at: www.goert.ca.

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*Refers to non-native species.