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First report of a Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) on Bermuda

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Photo: Richard Brewer

First report of a Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) on Bermuda

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Abstract This is the first report of a Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) on Bermuda. A female Mountain Bluebird was observed between 24 February and 23 March 2021 at Port Royal Golf Course (32°15'44"N, 64°52'26"W) on the island's southwestern edge. This observation also represents the first record of the species outside North America.

Keywords Bermuda, first record, Mountain Bluebird, Port Royal Golf Course, *Sialia currucoides*

Resumen Primer registro de *Sialia currucoides* en las Bermudas • Este es el primer registro de *Sialia currucoides* en las Bermudas. Entre el 24 de febrero y el 23 de marzo de 2021, una hembra de esta especie fue observada en el campo de golf de Port Royal (32°15'44"N, 64°52'26"W) en el extremo suroeste de la isla. Este avistamiento también representa el primer registro de la especie fuera de América del Norte.

Palabras clave Bermudas, campo de golf Port Royal, primer registro, *Sialia currucoides*

Résumé Premier signalement d'un Merlebleu azuré (*Sialia currucoides*) aux Bermudes • Il s'agit du premier signalement d'un Merlebleu azuré (*Sialia currucoides*) aux Bermudes. Une femelle de Merlebleu azuré a été observée entre le 24 février et le 23 mars 2021 sur le terrain de golf de Port-Royal (32°15'44"N, 64°52'26"W), à l'extrémité sud-ouest de l'île. Cette observation représente également la première mention de l'espèce en dehors de l'Amérique du Nord.

Mots clés Bermudes, Merlebleu azuré, premier signalement, *Sialia currucoides*, terrain de golf de Port-Royal

Bermuda is located in the western North Atlantic at 32°N and 64°W, the same longitude as Nova Scotia 1,250 km to the north and the British Virgin Islands 1,535 km to the south. The closest landfall to Bermuda is Cape Hatteras in North Carolina, some 1,070 km to the west-northwest (Dobson and Madeiros 2020). Bermuda's location in the North Atlantic and its proximity to North America makes the archipelago a frequent landing point for migrant and vagrant birds (Amos 1991).

Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) breed in the Rocky Mountains, from Alaska in the north to New Mexico and Arizona in the south (Fig. 1). However, Johnson and Dawson (2020) caution that "the winter range of the Mountain Bluebird has never been well defined, perhaps in part because the winter distribution apparently varies substantially across years in many areas, probably as a result of variation in weather and food supply." Birds arrive on their winter range between September and November, and in most locations, they leave their wintering sites between February and April. During the winter months, they are scarce from the Californian coast east to western Texas and south into northern Mexico. Mountain Bluebirds deviate outside

of their normal range much more frequently than the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) or Western Bluebird (*S. mexicana*) (Johnson and Dawson 2020). Rusk *et al.* (2013) reported 14 Mountain Bluebirds spread from Labrador to Florida in a 10-year period from fall 1998 to summer 2007. From 2007 to 2021, there have only been 25 additional records of Mountain Bluebirds scattered along the East Coast (eBird 2021). These extralimital records show that some Mountain Bluebirds have reached the East Coast of the US and Canada, although extremely rarely. Here we present observations of the first Mountain Bluebird reported on Bermuda.

Observations

During the late afternoon on 24 February 2021, AW was birding on Port Royal Golf Course at the southwest end of Bermuda (32°15'44"N, 64°52'26"W; Fig. 1) when she saw an odd-looking bluebird. The bird was pale blue-gray and about the size of an Eastern Bluebird, a common species in Bermuda. The Eastern Bluebird has a stable population of about 500 pairs and is found on golf courses, parks, and gardens where it relies almost exclusively on artificial nest boxes for breeding (Dobson 2002).

However, photos taken by IP on 26 February 2021 and then by RB on 27 February 2021 (Fig. 2) showed field marks consistent with a female Mountain Bluebird, distinguishing it from Bermuda's local female Eastern Bluebird (Fig. 3). It often flocked with

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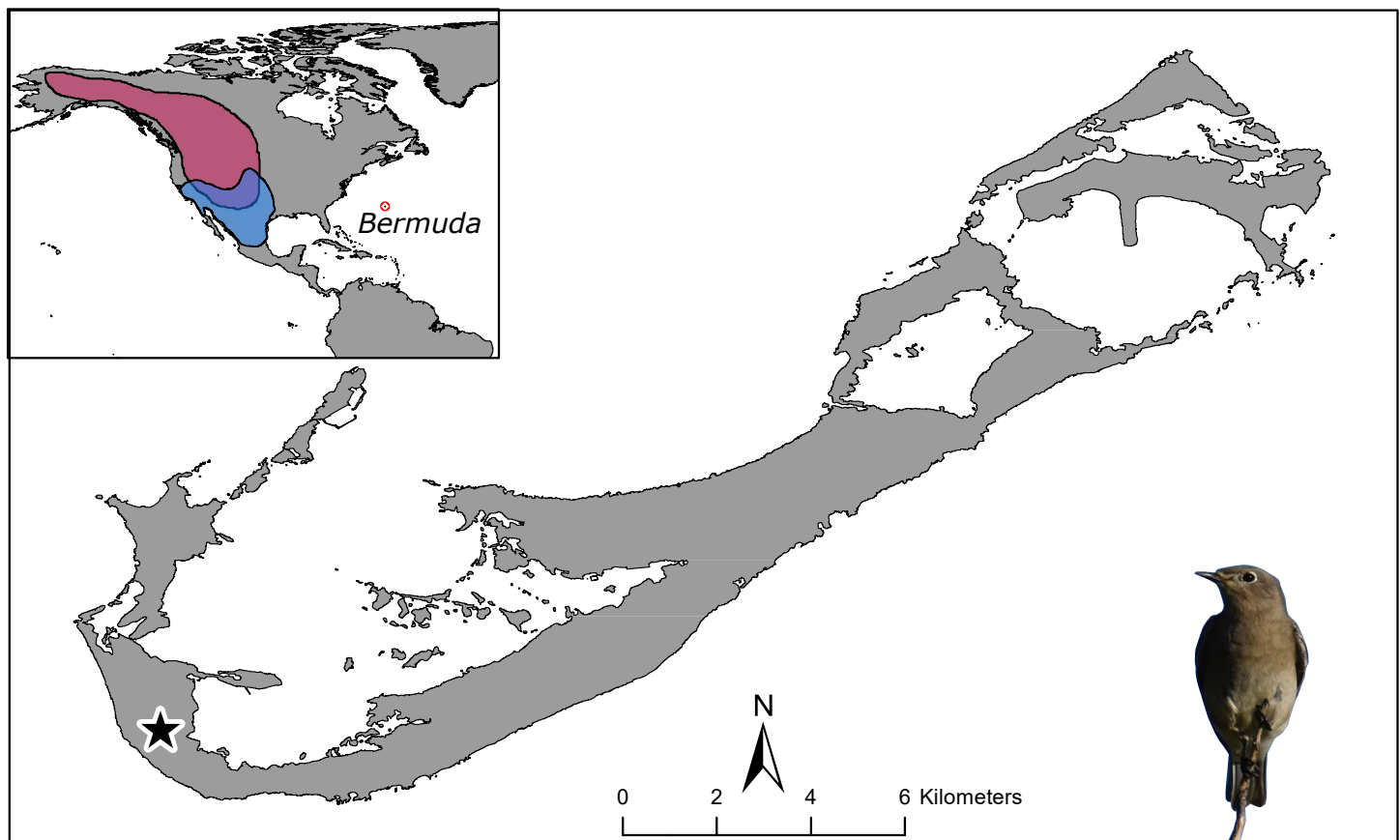


Fig. 1. A map of the Bermuda archipelago showing the location of Port Royal Golf Course ("star") where the female Mountain Bluebird was seen from 24 February to 23 March 2021. Maroon and blue colored polygons in inset map depict the approximate breeding and wintering range of the species, respectively, and their distance from Bermuda. Maps are based on those in *All About Birds* (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2019). Image of perched Mountain Bluebird taken at Port Royal Golf Course by Luke Foster.

two Eastern Bluebirds, which made this vagrant stand out. The observed individual had a brownish-gray wash over its nape, face, and underparts. Although both species have shades of blue on their wings and tail, the blue of this Mountain Bluebird was paler in comparison. It also lacked the Eastern Bluebird's cinnamon tones but shared the eye ring and white undertail coverts that are typical of both species. It appeared to have a longer, thinner bill and longer legs than nearby Eastern Bluebirds. The individual bird also showed a colder, less contrasting plumage than Eastern Bluebirds. In comparison, nearby female Eastern Bluebirds had a subtle bluish wash over their nape, and the most striking features were their light blue wings and tails which contrasted with their cinnamon brown neck, breast, and flanks. Their bellies and undertail coverts were white. Bermuda's Eastern Bluebirds have an overall bright, highly contrasting plumage.

At no point during this observation period was this bird captured or handled. Our photos lacked sufficient detail to say whether it was a second year or older bird (J. Randall and R. Dawson pers. comm.). However, the blue plumage on the rump and wings and the lack of obvious wearing of the tail feathers suggested that this was an after-second-year bird. Scrutiny of the greater secondary coverts would help distinguish the age of this bird, yet in some females the greater secondary coverts are

not diagnostic for aging. Nonetheless, this individual can safely be described as an after-hatch year (J. Randall and R. Dawson pers. comm.). The closest approach to the bird was about 10 m. The fate of the bird is unknown after it was last observed on 23 March 2021.

Discussion

It is not unusual for western North American passerine species to arrive in Bermuda, but almost all previous records occurred in the fall. The arrival of this Mountain Bluebird in Bermuda coincided with the polar vortex event in North America, which resulted in temperatures being as much as $14\text{--}28^{\circ}\text{C}$ below average. A southern migration of the jet stream in early February 2021 brought very cold air from the polar vortex into central parts of the US and as far south as northern Mexico (NOAA 2021). An analysis of eBird records from November 2020 to February 2021 found only two records of Mountain Bluebirds on the eastern seaboard: Cape Cod, MA (5 November 2020) and Harford, MD (22 November 2020) (eBird 2021). If Mountain Bluebirds were being forced eastwards by extreme weather, there is no evidence of any major eastward movement of bluebirds. The bird may well have arrived as a result of a cold front passing over Bermuda on 20 February 2021 or another frontal passage on 23 February 2021 (Bermuda Weather Service 2021). Port Royal



Fig. 2. Female Mountain Bluebird seen at Port Royal Golf Course in Bermuda between 24 February and 23 March 2021. Note the brownish-gray head and underparts and ashy-gray hue on the back, as well as a blue rump. The scapular, primary, and tail feathers also show mostly a light blue color. The grayish-brown wing coverts have white edges. Photographs by Ingela Perrson (left) and Richard Brewer (center and right).



Fig. 3. Plumage comparison of (left) female Eastern Bluebird at Southampton, Bermuda on 14 March 2015 and (right) female Mountain Bluebird at Port Royal Golf Course, Bermuda on 1 March 2021. Photographs by Richard Brewer.

Golf Course is a well-birded location and unusual birds are soon detected, so it is unlikely that this bird was present for long before being observed. Given Bermuda's isolated location in relation to migratory flyways and weather patterns, it is no surprise that the majority of bird species recorded could be considered vagrants (Dobson and Madeiros 2020). With no documented records of this species beyond the North American continent (AOU 1998, Johnson and Dawson 2020), this occurrence represents the first record of a Mountain Bluebird in Bermuda and the first record outside North America.

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the grounds during the COVID-19 pandemic. Special thanks to Russ Dawson for reviewing and improving this note and to Jeanine Randall for useful comments about aging.

Title Page Illustration

Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*) at Port Royal Golf Course, Bermuda on 1 March 2021. Photograph by Richard Brewer.

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