



1-31-1988

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Recommended Citation

Ellis, Kevin L. and Parrish, Jimmie R. (1988) "A case of leucism in the western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*)," *Great Basin Naturalist*: Vol. 48: No. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol48/iss1/12>

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A CASE OF LEUCISM IN THE WESTERN BLUEBIRD (*SIALIA MEXICANA*)

Kevin L. Ellis¹ and Jimmie R. Parrish²

ABSTRACT.—Leucism in the western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) is reported from La Plata County, Colorado.

Leucism in birds is a condition resulting from a partial loss of pigment, affecting all the colors present and reducing them in intensity (Harrison 1985). Recently, Jehl (1985) estimated that the frequency of leucism is rare in eared grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*). Occurrence overall is rare in birds, differing greatly among species (Sage 1963, Gross 1965). Herein, we report a case of leucism in a western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*).

A study of nest site fidelity of western bluebirds was conducted in the vicinity of Durango, La Plata County, Colorado, from May to July 1986. A total of 32 nest boxes were checked for occupancy and presence of nestlings, and young birds were monitored throughout the nesting cycle. Adults and young were banded with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service numbered leg bands. One particular nest box contained two young that differed considerably in early plumage color. One nestling appeared normally colored, while the other was very pale. The young bluebirds were approximately 15 days old when first observed, and remex and rectrix colors were not observable at that time. The nest box was visited 10 days later and both young appeared to have fledged successfully.

On 24 September 1986 at 1100 hrs, a leucistic western bluebird was seen feeding along a fence row approximately 6 km south of Durango, Colorado, in the company of normally colored bluebirds. The leucistic bluebird was collected and found to be the pale-colored individual banded as a nestling. Foot and eye color appeared normal. Head, breast, and back plumage was an uncharacteristic light brown, intermixed with white (Figs. 1A, 1B). Shoulder, upper wing, and tail coverts were lightly colored slate blue gray (Fig. 1A).

The outer vane of the distal primary remiges was white, while the inner vane was light tan (Fig. 1A). The proximal remiges were colored white on both the inner and outer vanes. The ventral surfaces of remiges were virtually all white, with the exception of a few centrally located remiges that were light tan on the ventral surface (Fig. 1B). The outer vane on the dorsal surface of the rectrices was also white, while the inner vane was light tan (Fig. 1A). Upper tail coverts were slightly colored with a light blue–purplish wash, and one darker central rectrix was approximately half emerged (Fig. 1A). The ventral surfaces of the rectrices were white (Fig. 1B). In addition, leucistic feathers were overall somewhat translucent (Figs. 1A, 1B). Sex could not be determined.

At least 10 cases of albinism have been reported for the eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) (Ross 1963). We found no previous record of albinism or leucism occurring in the western bluebird. Future population studies comparing eastern and western bluebirds should provide estimates of frequency and variation in expression of leucism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Clayton M. White and Joseph H. Jehl, Jr., for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. The specimen (No. 8356) is currently housed in the Monte L. Bean Life Sciences Museum at Brigham Young University.

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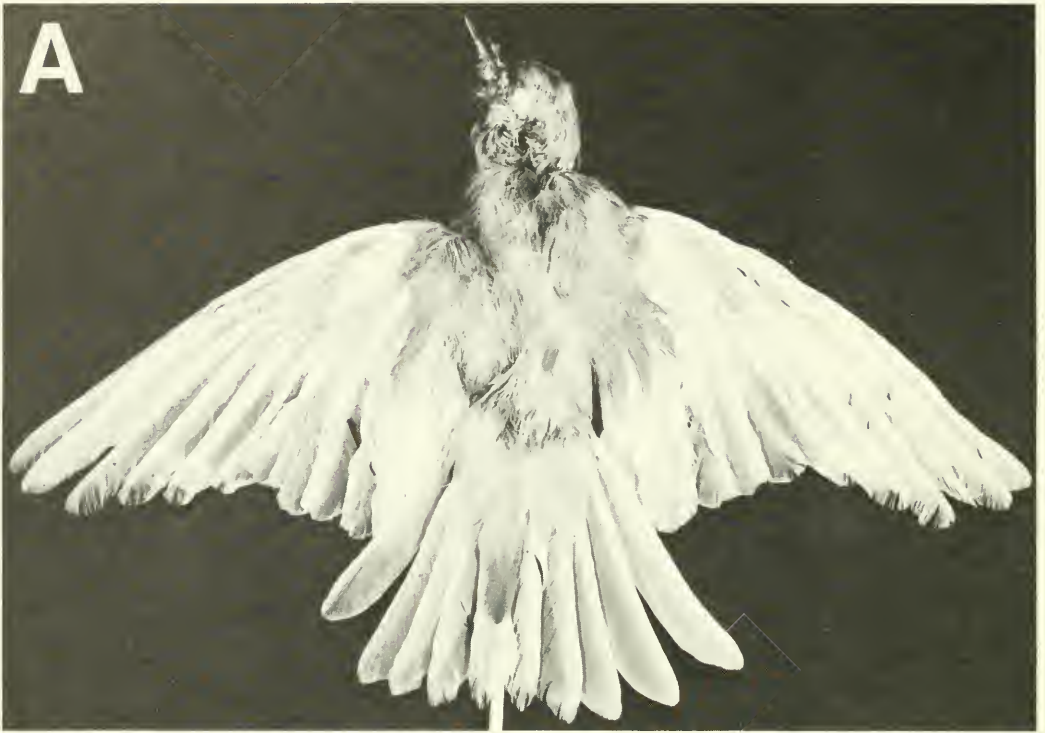


Fig. 1. Leucistic western bluebird collected in the vicinity of Durango, La Plata County, Colorado: A, dorsal view; B, ventral view.

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