

TUCSON AUDUBON NEWS ROUNDUP

Patagonia Mountains IBA and Our Special Azure Bluebird Arizona Important Bird Areas News

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The Arizona Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program has reached an exciting phase in its eleventh year and is perfectly situated to spring into its twelfth next year. One recent highlight was the highly anticipated addition of the Patagonia Mountains IBA to this network of Arizona sites recognized for their critical role as habitat for native birds. Tucson Audubon's amazingly dedicated IBA volunteers helped with survey efforts in this mountain range for many years. Their hard hard work was rewarded with this amazing area being recognized as an IBA, bringing Arizona's total up to 45 Important Bird Areas. This newest IBA stands out among its neighboring sky islands, the Huachuca Mountains IBA and Santa Rita Mountains IBA, because of its extensive oak habitat with intermittent meadows and creeks. This habitat zone is restricted to a "band" of habitat around the higher sky islands but makes up larger portions of this lower elevation mountain range. This makes this area

of critical importance for species associated with this habitat type.

There are many species of conservation concern and high birder interest associated with the extensive oak and meadow habitat of the Patagonia Mountains. These include Arizona Woodpecker, Montezuma Quail, Hepatic Tanager and Virginia's Warbler. One of the most interesting, however, is a bird that not many local birders even realize is around but can almost certainly recognize at a glance: Eastern Bluebird. There is a distinct sub-species of Eastern Bluebird that occurs in southeast Arizona known as Azure Bluebird or Mexican Bluebird and they are quite different from the "regular" Eastern Bluebirds. The Azure Bluebirds that love the meadows and grasslands of southeast Arizona are smaller and paler than their eastern cousins and stay in this habitat year-round instead of migrating. It is tempting to think of



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Map of Eastern Bluebird distribution. The Eastern Bluebirds we have here in SE Arizona are not from the east but from the south.

these birds as pioneers from the eastern population that have made it out west. But in reality the situation is more complex and international. The range of Eastern Bluebirds extends significantly into Mexico and our Azure Bluebirds are a northern extension of the birds that inhabit the Sierra Madre mountain chain. This means that the Azure Bluebird that helped to make the Patagonia Mountains an Important Bird Area are one more "Mexican

specialty" bird that makes Southeast Arizona such a great place for birders.

The Arizona IBA crew will continue to survey for Azure Bluebirds in the Patagonia Mountains in the face of several threats to this area including the Wildcat Silver Mine. The Patagonia Mountains are the most significant habitat for these birds and we will endeavor to keep this area "for the birds."



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There are many species of conservation concern and high birder interest associated with the extensive oak and meadow habitat of the Patagonia Mountains (bottom left) including a bird that not many local birders even realize is around but can almost certainly recognize at a glance, Eastern Bluebird (bottom right).