



# neighborhood naturalist

Nature you can find in town and the nearby countryside

Corvallis, Oregon

Fall 2009

## Western Bluebird

by Don Boucher

Perhaps because the eastern portion of our continent is much more populated than the West, the Eastern Bluebird is known by more people than its western counterpart. Most books, articles and media featuring bluebirds show the Eastern Bluebird. Our Western Bluebird is sometimes even thought of as a spring migrant in our area, confusing them with the habits of their eastern cousins. It can be an easy mistake to make. For example, you might see bluebirds arrive at a nestbox in spring, and leave after they finish nesting. This is because their wintering and nesting grounds may be in different locales within our region. By fall, the nesting pair and their fledglings may leave the nesting area to forage in open country nearby. We're lucky to have Western Bluebirds as year-round residents in the Willamette Valley, and fall and winter are excellent times to observe them.

When not nesting, bluebirds are encountered in flocks of a few birds (usually a family) to sometimes a dozen and occasionally more. After the nestlings fledge, the family will likely remain together for a while, sometimes even

throughout the winter. How long the fledglings remain with the parents depends on the availability of food. If food is scarce, the young birds will leave their parents' territory early and may travel far, especially young males. The better the food source is, the longer a bluebird family will stay together, and the young ones will disperse a shorter distance.

Let's look at the bluebird's association with birdhouses. In popular culture, these house-shaped structures are romanticized and may be decorated in a kitschy, dollhouse fashion. I feel the term "nestbox" is more appropriate and descriptive. I don't object to the term "birdhouse," nor is there necessarily a problem with decorated versions. However, bluebirds use these structures primarily for nesting. Occasionally a nestbox may be used for roosting at night, but birds use them primarily to raise their young. Outside of breeding season, they typically spend the night on a safe perch. Of course, there are other species who use nestboxes too. Only birds who nest in natural cavities, like bluebirds, will use a nestbox, while those who build an open cup nest will not.



*A Western Bluebird father has captured a spider for his nestlings*

photo by Lisa Milbank

In the Eastern Bluebird's range, nestbox programs for bluebirds have been in place for many decades. In our part of the Willamette Valley, a successful nestbox program was founded by Elsie Eltzroth of the Audubon Society of Corvallis in 1976. In the early years of the program, the local bluebird population was small and waning. The population has recovered well, and these days Western Bluebirds are regular nesters in some Corvallis neighborhoods. There is much literature and many Web sites dedicated to information about bluebird nestbox requirements. If you're interested in helping bluebirds with nestboxes, a good place to start is with the Audubon Society of Corvallis' Bluebird Trail program ([www.audubon.corvallis.or.us](http://www.audubon.corvallis.or.us)). We should laud our bluebird nestbox programs and they should continue in earnest, but it's important to understand bluebirds beyond their association with the nestboxes we provide for them. It's more accurate to associate bluebirds with natural tree cavities than with nestboxes, because bluebirds have evolved to nest in tree holes. Due to development and invasive species, those natural tree cavities are in short supply.

It's possible to both increase native habitat and encourage the presence of bluebirds where native habitat has been displaced. As long as their nesting requirements are met (i.e. nestboxes), bluebirds can get along in rural and suburban areas. Bluebirds are primarily insect-eaters and secondarily fruit-eaters. They catch insects and other invertebrates in open spaces such as oak savannas, prairies, parks and fields. They won't eat seed at a bird feeder. In winter, the role of fruit is critical. On our Oregon White Oaks, Oak Mistletoe is common. It grows out of the bark and gets

its water and minerals from the tree, but has green leaves to photosynthesize its own food. For this, mistletoe gets classified as a hemiparasite. In other parts of the continent Oak Mistletoe commonly grows on other tree species, but here it is most successful on Oregon White Oak. Mistletoe berries are an important winter food for bluebirds. The more Oregon White Oaks there are, whether in protected areas or planted for landscaping, the better off the bluebirds will be. (Why plant introduced oak species when Oregon White Oak makes a fine landscaping tree?) As it turns out, the better off the mistletoe will be, too. Mistletoe depends on bluebirds (and some other bird species, too) to plant its seeds. The seeds in the berries are sticky, so the bluebird may wipe off seeds stuck to its bill onto the bark, or they may be pooped out onto an oak branch. The mistletoe seeds may stick to a crevice suitable for germination. When you see a cluster of mistletoe on an oak branch, it's plausible evidence of bluebird activity.



photos by Don Boucher

*Mistletoe clusters are most visible in winter (left). Mistletoe berries are translucent white (right).*

Other types of unrelated birds are blue (like some jays or buntings for instance), and some people incorrectly call any bird that is a blue a bluebird. But true bluebirds are thrushes, just like robins, and they are in the family Turdidae. The Western Bluebird is one of three species in the genus *Sialia*, and all are restricted to North America. The Eastern Bluebird lives east of the Rocky Mountains, and the Mountain Bluebird lives in the interior west, but not in the Willamette Valley.



USFWS, Jesse Achtenberg

**Mountain Bluebird**  
In central and eastern Oregon, the range of the Mountain Bluebird overlaps with that of the Western Bluebird. The two species are easy to distinguish since the Mountain Bluebird has no cinnamon color (males are solid blue and females are gray and blue).

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<p>5008 SW Technology Loop #9 Corvallis, OR 97333</p>	
<p>541-753-7689 information@neighborhood-naturalist.com <b>www.neighborhood-naturalist.com</b></p>	
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photos by Lisa Millbank



### Lazuli Bunting

In May, a similar-looking bird arrives in the Willamette Valley whose habitat preferences overlaps the Western Bluebird's. The male Lazuli Bunting has a blue head, back and tail and a cinnamon wash on the breast with a white belly. The female is a soft brown color. However, being a seed-eater, the Lazuli Bunting has a stout, conical bill. It also has a white wing bar which a bluebird lacks. The bunting's blue is more sky-colored compared to the deep blue of the Western Bluebird.



photo by Lisa Millbank

Western Bluebird, adult female

Western Bluebird has a cinnamon wash mixed within the blue on his back, whereas the Eastern Bluebird's back is solid blue. The male Western Bluebird's blue is a little more violet in tone than the blue of the male Eastern



photo by Lisa Millbank

Western Bluebird fledglings are gray and spotty with a white eye ring.

Bluebird. In fall or winter, search for bluebirds in open spaces, especially where there is abundant mistletoe on oaks. You aren't likely to find bluebirds in dense forests, wetlands or urban areas. Vast agricultural areas with few field margins and hedgerows tend to be lacking in bluebirds. Fields near foothills and riverside forest edges are good spots. Overgrown fields with a few trees and shrubs are good too. My favorite winter spots to find them in Corvallis are Marys River Natural Park, Chip Ross Park and Bald Hill Park. At Finley National Wildlife Refuge, check the platform overlook at the North Prairie (on Finley Refuge Rd.). Bald Top's oak savannas are on the west part of the refuge and can viewed from Woodpecker Loop. On Bruce Road, just outside the southwest boundary of Finley, there's a Christmas tree farm which hosts bluebirds year-round (other Christmas tree farms may be good bluebird spots as well). I've seen bluebirds in oak savannas on the northern hills of Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge near Rickreall. Champoeg State Park, southeast of Newberg, is well known for nesting bluebirds. The oak-covered foothills and open spaces around Mount Pisgah south of Springfield are good too. In my neighborhood I see them at the community garden at Starker Park, or near the intersection of Western and Philomath Blvds. Flocks can be quite nomadic in fall and winter and sometimes they turn up in spots they commonly do not visit. Surely

USFWS, Dr. Thomas G. Barnes



photo by Lisa Millbank

Eastern Bluebird male (left) and Western Bluebird male (right)

You won't need to distinguish the eastern and western species in the field (their ranges barely overlap), but isn't it nice to know why our species is unique? I get the impression that most items depicting bluebirds use the Eastern Bluebird. When you find a bluebird image, look at the throat. Eastern Bluebird males have a cinnamon throat while Western Bluebird males have a blue throat. This is a well-known, reliable identification feature. Indeed, according to the Spanish version of the Kaufman bird field guide, the name for the Western Bluebird is *azulejo de garganta azul*, which means "blue-throated bluebird." The Eastern Bluebird is *azulejo de garganta canela*, meaning "cinnamon-throated bluebird." Another important point is that male and female Western Bluebirds have gray bellies. The bellies of both male and female Eastern Bluebirds are white. The male



*Western Bluebird, adult male*

there are many other good bluebird spots throughout the Willamette Valley. Scout out some potential spots in your area that match the habitats I've described here.

It may take a little practice to notice them easily. Be on the lookout for a flock of small birds (they're just a little bigger than a sparrow) whose flight pattern resembles that of a robin. When the light is good, the deep blue of the males is obvious. Females and juveniles are more gray than blue. On a cloudy day, the blue color is subdued, and you'll be depending on shape, silhouette and pattern to notice them. If you can learn the sounds of the Western Bluebird, this will help you find them reliably. Next to their pretty blue color, their call contributes to their reputation as sweet little birds. They make a soft *phew* note as they talk to each other. They call often throughout the day and if they're around you're likely to hear them. I've learned to imitate the call, and can often get them to answer me, although they're a bit too shy to approach me. The male's spring song resembles a collection of call notes. He makes a double-noted *phew-phi* and adds other, more extended *phews* in the repertoire. It isn't particularly melodious, but it's a precious song nonetheless.

So go out and give bluebird-watching a try. Make your upcoming fall and winter more bright and cheerful with plenty of bluebird sightings! 🐦



Listen to the sounds and watch a video of Western Bluebirds at [www.neighborhood-naturalist.com](http://www.neighborhood-naturalist.com)

# Fall Mushrooms

article and photography by Lisa Millbank

Cool, rainy fall weather brings a crop of colorful mushrooms to woods and fields in our area. Like spring wildflowers, fall mushrooms can have brilliant colors. Take a walk in damp woods and notice the interesting textures and odors of different mushrooms. Notice slugs and springtails dining on the bounty as newts stroll among the stalks. For many people, fall is a time to enjoy the variety of flavors and textures of their favorite edible mushrooms. Of course, wild mushrooms should always be eaten with care and positive identification.



◀ **Shaggy Mane, *Coprinus comatus***  
Delicious and often abundant, Shaggy Manes begin to digest their own caps soon after they mature. For this reason, mushroom hunters rush their Shaggy Manes home to cook immediately. As the bottom of the cap begins to liquefy, the edges of the cap curl back, helping the mushroom release spores. The process continues until only the stalk is left.



A mushroom is simply the “fruiting body” of a fungus. Fungi are thread-like organisms living in organic matter such as decaying vegetation or wood, or as symbiotic partners with tree roots. When the climatic conditions are right for a fungus to reproduce by dispersing its spores, it grows the special spore-bearing structure that we call a mushroom.

The conditions for spore dispersal are usually best in fall or spring, when the damp weather will help the spores grow, should they land on a suitable substrate. Picking mushrooms is a benign activity, much like picking fruit. The fungus is still living within the substrate, and will grow new mushrooms again when the time is right. 🍄



▲ **Carbon Forks, *Xylaria hypoxylon***

Also called *Carbon Antlers* or *Candlesnuff Fungus*, this tiny, leathery mushroom grows on rotten wood. Flick it with a fingernail to release a cloud of the white spores that coat the upper portion.



▲ **Witch's Butter, *Tremella mesenterica***

This mushroom grows on hardwood logs. Shriveled when dry, it quickly plumps up after rain. It's gelatinous and nearly flavorless, but I sometimes eat them. A similar species grows on conifer wood.



◀ **Black Jelly Roll, *Exidia glandulosa***

While it may look like something deposited by a bear with a stomachache, Black Jelly Roll is composed of masses of small jelly-like blobs that grow together. It grows on rotting hardwood logs or branches.



▲ **Sulfur Shelf, *Laetiporus conifericola***

This big, bright mushroom is often called “Chicken of the Woods.” The tender edges of the shelf-like caps make a good vegetarian chicken substitute when cooked. Clusters of Sulfur Shelf can weigh more than 50 pounds!

▲ **Sessile Earthstar, *Geastrum saccatum***

An earthstar is a type of puffball with an outer case that splits open, revealing the spore case. Raindrops falling on the papery spore case cause a dusting of spores to puff out of the central pore.

# Western Poison-oak

article and photography by Lisa Millbank

Fall in the Willamette Valley is a time of subdued beauty, with leaves turning subtle browns, coppers, and golds. In the nearby hills, splashes of bright Vine Maple stand out against the Douglas-firs. But some of the nearby autumn color seems to go unnoticed. It's Western Poison-oak, a plant that's so disliked that even its spectacular blazes of red, orange, yellow, and maroon can't seem to redeem it.

An adaptable plant, it can grow in full sun, in the shade, or in dry or moist sites. It grows as a shrub or as a woody vine, climbing into the treetops. Its leaves are highly variable, some deeply lobed, others almost oval. It's sometimes confused with oak leaves where the two grow together. In the spring, it produces dangling clusters of flowers, which turn to small white fruits by late summer. By this time, its glossy, deciduous leaves are turning colors. Through winter, Western Poison-oak is dormant, but still bearing clusters of fruits on its leafless twigs. It's a vigorous plant, tolerating drought or fire.

*Toxicodendron diversilobum*, the botanical name of Western Poison-oak, means "poison tree with varied lobes," referring to the chemical irritant and the variable leaf shapes of this plant. It belongs to the same family as cashews, mangos and pistachios. The infamous contact dermatitis caused by Western Poison-oak is caused by an allergy to one chemical, *urushiol*.



Black resin stains a cut stem of Western Poison-oak

Urushiol isn't present on the undamaged surface of the plant. Some references claim that the glossy leaf surface is coated with "toxic oils," but the urushiol is exclusively within the resin ducts inside the stems, leaves and fruits. An allergic person could probably touch a completely intact leaf without having a

reaction—but I don't recommend trying this! I'm one of the lucky 10-20% of people who do not suffer any reaction to this plant. While I waded through waist-high thickets of it without any problems, I try to avoid direct contact with my bare skin. I don't expect my immunity to last forever, but I'll take advantage of it while I can.

Urushiol is one component of the sticky resin that oozes out of an injury and eventually polymerizes into a tough, black, plastic-like substance. The polymerization may deter some insects by hardening and blocking the flow of resin on which they are feeding. The similar resin derived from a related species, Lacquer Tree (*T. vernicifluum*), is used to make beautiful, lustrous Japanese lacquerware. The Japanese term for the tree and the lacquer derived from it is *urushi*, from which we get the name *urushiol*, and artists who use the lacquer know that until it is thoroughly cured, it causes a terrible rash in sensitive individuals.

Soon after skin exposure to the resin, the urushiol will begin to oxidize and penetrate the epidermis to bond directly to cell membranes, making it impossible to wash away. That's why immediate washing with a solvent strong enough to remove the sticky terpene resin is essential for allergic people, and any treatment after the urushiol has penetrated the skin will simply address the symptoms of the inevitable allergic reaction. Once the immune system is sensitized to the urushiol, an army of white blood cells will detect and chemically destroy all of the tissue with bound urushiol. The human allergy is an overreaction by the immune system to a fairly benign substance, and seems to be an unfortunate coincidence, not an attempt by the plant to chemically defend itself from humans. Most other mammals are able to contact, and even eat Western Poison-oak with impunity.

Western Poison-oak is surrounded by myths, including the notion that one can develop immunity by eating bits of the plant, or by eating Western Poison-oak flower honey. I



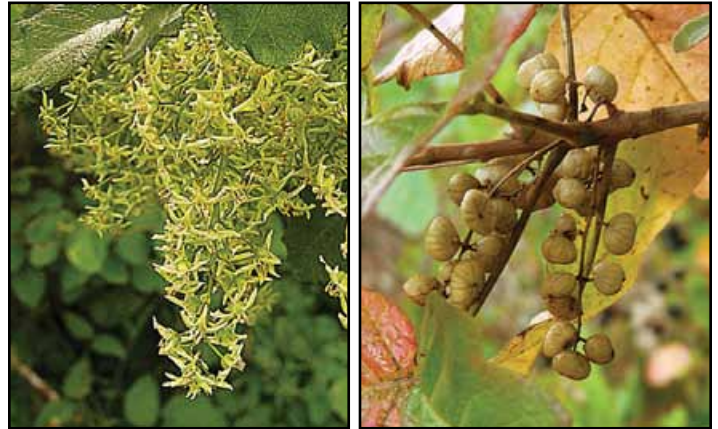
Western Poison-oak is known for its three leaflets ("Leaflets three, let it be"), but many other plants have three leaflets.

think that eating the plant is foolish and likely to cause a serious reaction or sensitize individuals who were previously immune. Western Poison-oak honey contains no urushiol, and therefore will not cause a reaction. While the honey is harmless, there is no way it can desensitize an allergic person to urushiol. Though western Native Americans are reported to have used Western Poison-oak medicinally, and some even used the young stems and resin for basketry, it's a myth that all native people were immune to Western Poison-oak. That some people suffered from Western Poison-oak allergy is certain, as there were many remedies to soothe the rash, such as gumweeds (*Grindelia*) and mule's-ears (*Wyethia*).

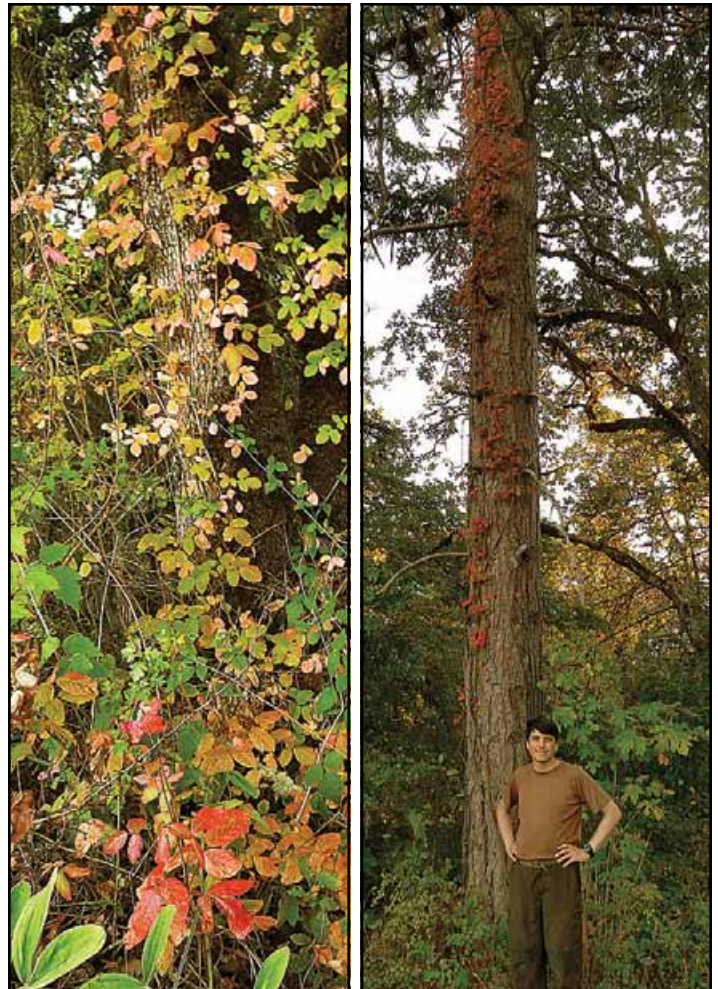
While humans generally try to avoid this plant, Northern Flickers, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Hermit Thrushes, Swainson's Thrushes, Downy Woodpeckers and many other birds eat the fruits, usually in winter when tastier foods are not available. The most enthusiastic consumer of Western Poison-oak fruits is the Wren; at times, these fruits may make up 25% of its diet. Besides providing food, the shrubby plants provide nesting places for birds like Spotted Towhees, Bewick's Wrens, Song Sparrows, Wren-tits, and other brush-loving birds. Although Brush

Rabbits, Eastern Cottontails, Blacktail Deer, and Elk sometimes eat the stems and leaves, it's only an occasional food source. A Dusky-footed or a Bushy-tailed Woodrat may use the stems in house construction.

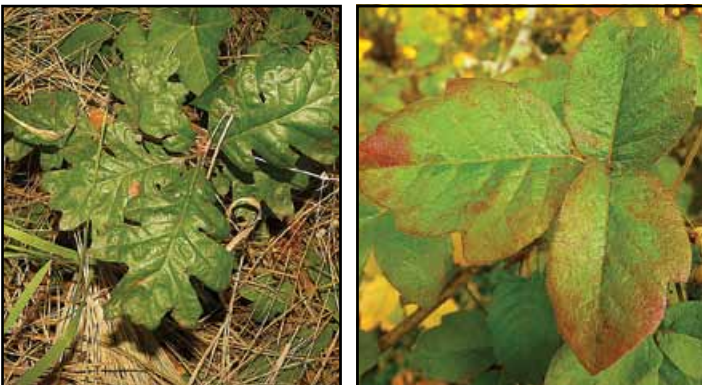
Were it not for the rash it causes, I think Western Poison-oak would be appreciated for what it truly is: a beautiful native plant, attractive to wildlife and one of the few climbing vines in our region. 🦉



Western Poison-oak flowers (left) and fruits (right)



Western Poison-oak can climb high into treetops.



Oregon White Oak (left) and Western Poison-oak (right). When Poison-oak leaves are lobed, they are often confused with oaks.



### Female Hairy Woodpecker

It can be difficult to distinguish Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers. Both are similarly patterned with black and white, males having a red patch on the back of the head. The most obvious difference is size, with Downies being the tiniest local woodpeckers, at about 6¾” long. The Hairy is about the size of a Red-breasted Sapsucker or Acorn Woodpecker, around 9¼” long.



### Male Downy Woodpecker

Another way to tell the birds apart visually is by the proportional lengths of their bills. The Downy has a small bill, while the Hairy’s bill is long and heavy, nearly the length of the head. It takes some time to learn the difference between their calls. The Downy’s calls include a *pik* and a whinnying call. The Hairy makes a sharper, louder *peek* and a slurred whinny call.



Watch videos of Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers at [www.neighborhood-naturalist.com](http://www.neighborhood-naturalist.com)

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5008 Technology Loop #9  
Corvallis, OR 97333