

Western Meadowlark



toire some colorful species: the Western Meadowlark, and the Western Bluebird.

Among the sweetest of birds is the **Mourning Dove**. Large (12") but graceful, with a short neck and small head, doves are often seen walking about on the ground in pairs, heads moving back and forth like pigeons.



These are the birds that play chicken with you on the road – you swear they will not get off to the side in time, but they always do. They are grey, with a black spot behind and below the eye and a somewhat rosy breast. Most distinctive is their long, triangular tail, which comes to a point and is edged in black and white. Doves often flush, so their tail shapes and edges can be clearly seen. They often perch on telephone wires as well. Their name comes from their plaintive call – who-ooo, whooo, whooo, whooo, higher-pitched on the ooo.

Now shift your gaze upward slightly to the level of high grass, wire fences, fenceposts and tall weeds, ranging between the ground and the telephone wires. In open grasslands, like those below the Poly P, you may continue to spot sparrows and goldfinches, but you may add to your reper-

Keep an eye out for flocks of miniature flying footballs – brown birds pointy at each end but quite fat in the middle, about 9" in size. When they land or perch, they seem dull, being mottled brown overall with some white in the tail and a white eye stripe, but when one turns to face you, you'll be rewarded with the sight of a bright yellow breast with a strong black V below the throat. These are **Western Meadowlarks**, year-round residents of open grasslands. They favor perching on tall stalks or fenceposts when they are not strutting about in the grass. From a perch the Meadowlark sings its striking song of clear, flutelike notes, whistles, and gurgles with abrupt pitch changes, usually ending on downward gurgling notes. It reminds me of breaking glass.

Sure to produce oohs, aahs, and dropped jaws on a beginner's birdwalk is the neon blue of the male **Western Bluebird**, medium-sized (7"), with a needle-like bill. The blue of the wings and head is almost unbelievable in bright sunlight, making this bird a favorite for many. The blue continues on the bird's throat, but its breast is rusty red, with some rusty continuing onto the bird's back. These



Western Bluebird

birds are often spotted in flocks in open fields and on fences and phone wires, or in male/female pairs.

Let us move a bit higher now into the trees, and consider woodland birds that frequent solitary oaks, oak or evergreen groves, and streamside trees. Poly, Stenner and Pennington Canyons abound in these, sometimes near the streams and sometimes on hillsides or in groves scattered about open grasslands.



The tiniest bird you might see (apart from a hummingbird) is the **Bushtit**. You are likely to hear them before you see them. Bushtits travel in dense flocks and keep track of each other by emitting an almost constant deep pee-deep deep deep. They move from bush to bush or from tree to tree, often venturing one by

one across dangerous open spaces where they might easily be snatched by a hawk or falcon. They are plain gray with some brown on the face, short needly bills, and (relative to their 4" overall length) long tails. These birds are common in all vegetated areas, including built-up locations.

Novices and veteran birders alike enjoy seeing woodpeckers, with their dramatic plumage and (in the male) red-marked heads. Though no western woodpecker has a completely red head (the Red-headed Woodpecker is an eastern bird), our males oblige with bright scarlet patches on the back of the head. Our most striking and abundant woodpecker is the **Acorn**

Woodpecker, so named for its habit of drilling holes in tree trunks and inserting acorns for later consumption. In your walks you may happen upon trees that have been appropriated for food storage in this way; they look like they have been hit numerous times with large-caliber buckshot. Around 9" long, this woodpecker is mostly solid black.

Acorn Woodpecker

