



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

December 2, 2022



Western Bluebird with shoe



Patient in her enclosure

The Slow Recovery of a Western Bluebird

Western Bluebirds are small birds that breed throughout much of the western United States, Mexico, and southwestern Canada. Adult males can easily be spotted with their bright blue plumage on the head, wings, and tail, and an orange rust color on the chest. Females and juveniles of the species have similar coloration, except in more muted tones. These birds readily consume insects in the spring and summer months when this food type is plentiful, and their winter diet consists mostly of small fruits and berries. Western Bluebirds can usually be found in open forests and park-like habitats where a significant number of trees are available to provide nest sites and perches.

Here at CWC we receive about ten Western Bluebirds each year. On average half of these patients are orphans who need supportive care until they are able to survive on their own in the wild, while the other half are injured adults. Window strikes are the most common reasons why adult Western Bluebirds are admitted to CWC.

This was the case for an adult female Western Bluebird who was found near a window in Malibu and was then brought to CWC by a member of the public. Technicians assessed the patient and upon arrival they noticed that the bird was unable to stand, consistently fell to the left, and had a mild right wing droop. The patient had hit the window so hard that she ended up suffering from a broken right clavicle (a bone at the base of the neck) and significant head trauma. Anti-inflammatories and pain medication were prescribed, and the bluebird was placed in a small enclosure to keep her confined. It was not possible to create a splint for the fractured bone and so the best course of action for the patient was to prohibit her from flying so that the bone could properly heal.

After a few days in care the bluebird began to show signs of improvement. She was starting to regularly stay upright and began eating on her own and gaining weight. Once the patient was using her feet, hospital staff noticed that the bird was having trouble extending most of her toes. A custom shoe was made for her left foot and a small wrap was placed on the right foot in order to place her digits in a natural position.



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Although the patient responded well to medications during the first week, her improvement stagnated over time. Hospital staff closely monitored the bluebird's ability to perch, stand, and maneuver around her enclosure. After a few additional days of supportive care, the bird once again made progress. After almost a month in care, the patient is still confined to a small enclosure and is receiving daily medications, but her enclosure is being moved outside into an aviary during the daylight hours in order for the bird to become acclimated to the weather. We are hopeful that this Western Bluebird will continue to improve and will be transferred into a flight aviary soon.

Window strikes occur during the day because birds see the reflection of the natural environment in panes of glass. Wildlife is unable to tell that a window is a solid object and so birds will fly full speed into them. Migrating birds flying at night will crash into windows because they become disoriented and fly towards unnatural light sources. There are many simple things people can do to prevent window strikes from occurring. Strips of frosted or opaque tape can be placed four inches apart on panes of glass to prevent daytime collisions, and blackout curtains will block light from escaping at night which will protect nocturnal migrants. Hanging decorative ropes in front of glass or placing decals less than four inches apart are some other ways to help make windows bird safe.

If you find a bird that has hit a window, place them in a box with airholes in a quiet, dark location and contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center for advice. Many times, these birds will need professional help before being released back into the wild.