

## Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

2008 Fall newsletter

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### Bill Read

Welcome to the 2008 fall newsletter. **The spring 2009 OEBS AGM will be held on March 14<sup>th</sup> at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington.** Mark this on your calendar and check the website for more details. [www.oebs.ca](http://www.oebs.ca)

It has been quite a year! The start was horrendous with record nestling mortality in May caused by unseasonably cold weather from May 18<sup>th</sup> to May 23<sup>rd</sup>. Overall May was 2 degrees Celsius lower than average. Reports indicated that good numbers of bluebirds had returned and were nesting successfully up to this point with most nests containing young. What you can do to help your bluebirds survive this cold. **Meal worm feeders** and nest boxes with **no ventilation holes** will help. I use duct tape to cover any ventilation holes in the early spring. **Nest boxes should not be built with ventilation holes.** The only opening should be the 1.5 inch hole opening which should always face away from the prevailing winds. The rest of the breeding season was excellent for most bluebirders. Many bluebirds that lost young on that first nesting still attempted two more nestings. This meant more nests that went into August. Lots of rain meant lots of insects. Records for amount of rainfall were broken across Ontario. So much for David Phillips forecast for a hot dry summer. March was 3 degrees Celsius lower than normal followed by April that was 2 degrees warmer than average. Last year it was the reverse with March warmer than average and April much colder than average. This unusually cold weather in April 2007 resulted in very heavy adult Tree Swallow mortality. **Linda and Al Thrower** who manage a trail at the Nanticoke Generating station on the shore of Lake Erie recovered **185 dead Tree Swallows** from boxes on that property. Another 44 dead Tree Swallows were recovered from Ruthven and Doon Valley. In 2007 I recovered 15 dead Tree Swallows from boxes near Paris during early April. May 2008 was 2 degrees colder than average but most of the extreme cold came between May 18<sup>th</sup> and May 23<sup>rd</sup>, a critical time for first brood nestlings. The lack of insects and the extreme cold caused record Eastern Bluebird nestling mortality during this period.

**Reports from the field** I lost 46 young in May due to the weather. Despite these losses and with the addition of 30 new boxes I was able to fledge 312 young. I banded a total of 375 bluebirds including 52 adults and 52 retrapped previously banded adults. Two of these retrapped birds were banded by **Bob Hubert** near Port Stanley in 2005. Both had 2 successful nestings in apple

orchards producing 19 fledged young in 2008. During the cold spell in May I had one pair of bluebirds in an apple orchard that fed **sumac** fruit to their young. This illustrates how desperate they were for food sources. They were not successful with this brood but re-nested in the same box and fledged 5 young. **Jerry Powers** from Owen Sound, last year's recipient of the OEBS conservation award fledged 226 bluebirds. Gerry's boxes are located in Bruce and Grey counties. **Gerry** also fledged 385 Tree Swallows from 69 nests. **Gerry** has had success feeding currants to early arriving Tree Swallows in a special elongated nest box that he designed. He also uses a mealworm feeder for bluebirds. **Dan Baarda** was able to fledge 36 bluebirds from his 45 nest boxes located below and above the escarpment near Beamsville. **Robert Hunt** and **Lorne Smith** fledged 244 bluebirds from their 690 boxes located in Grey and Bruce counties near Owen Sound.

**Ken Reger** who monitors a 345 nest box trail north of Waterloo was able to fledge 422 bluebirds despite losing 62 young to the cold weather in May. He also lost 65 to 70 young to **House sparrows** despite continued efforts to control them. Ken has had success using the slot box which he endorses. The opening must be exactly one and three sixteenths of an inch from the top. **Dave Lamble** banded 390 bluebirds from Ken's boxes.

**Don Wills** fledged 581 bluebirds from 425 boxes. Don lost 63 young to the cold weather in May.

**Chris Lyons** was able to fledge 260 young from 50 pairs despite the cold in May and problems with House Wrens. Twenty of his first brood Bluebirds failed, nineteen due to weather and one to Tree Swallows. Chris' trail of 250 boxes is located near Port Hope.

Chris highly recommends the use of the sparrow spooker (see article in this newsletter) along with the humane removal of House Sparrows from his trail.

**House Sparrow** numbers were lower than last year according to most reports. This is probably due to the longer winter last year. I had very few on my trails but one roving male still managed to kill four young bluebirds in one of the orchards. After killing the young it did not attempt to nest and I was unable to remove it. This is the first year Chris has not lost any bluebirds to House Sparrows. Chris highly recommends the **sparrow spooker** and has had good success with the wren guard described in the NABS newsletter. The **North American Bluebird Society** is still offering half price on all affiliate memberships. This is still a great deal despite the low dollar. OEBS is an affiliate member of the NABS. According to Chris the noel guard does not discourage House Wrens, I agree. It also deters bluebirds from nesting. **Further nest box reports will be in the 2009 spring newsletter.**

## **Executive positions change**

**Anne Davidson** has taken the position of Membership Secretary and Treasurer over from **Julie Liptak**. Other commitments have not allowed **Julie** to continue in this position. We thank her for getting our membership base back in order and wish her well in the future. **Anne Davidson** a former bank executive and our past recording secretary will assume this position. **Anne** brings a wealth of experience in accounting and bookkeeping to this position. We very much look forward to working with her in this new placement. **As I have stated many times we would not have a Bluebird Society if it wasn't for the tremendous support of both our executive and our membership and I thank them all.**

## **What happens to unmonitored nest box trails?**

This spring I removed 40 nest boxes mounted on fence posts from a trail located just south of Guelph that was no longer being monitored. The contents of each nest box examined and recorded. Thirty four had **House Sparrow** nests, three to four had **deer mice**, one to two had **Tree Swallows** and only one had **bluebirds** from the previous year. All had a special plastic extension that was mounted with screws over the nest hole. After the extensions were removed and discarded, most of the boxes were salvageable. These extensions should not be used on any bluebird trail. Proper nest box set up on greased poles or T-Bars make this unnecessary. They were repaired, re nailed and then painted. They were then taken to Don Wills near Carluke to be mounted on seven foot metal poles. Don provided the poles and hardware and drilled each pole to fit the nest box.

I put up the boxes on my trail and was able to attract eight additional pair of bluebirds. All the poles were greased. Some were used to twin with another box that already had bluebirds so when they fledged at least one box would be open for a second bluebird nesting. **This clearly illustrates how harmful fence mounted unmonitored nest boxes can be.** If you know of a trail that is not being monitored please look into removing the boxes or find out who put them up and show them the above. Thanks to Don for his assistance.

**Peter Rae** reported on an unmonitored nest box trail located near Dundas with 17 boxes. After examining them Peter found that all were occupied by **House Sparrows**. Peter removed **238** House Sparrow eggs from these boxes over the course of the 2008 breeding season. Peter will be removing these boxes and relocating them for 2009 in areas where the boxes will be used by bluebirds and Tree Swallows. This further illustrates the harm that is done by well meaning individuals who have no understanding of how to properly monitor a Bluebird trail. Unfortunately for bluebirds and Tree Swallows many of these trails exist around the Province. If you know of **an unmonitored trail** contact the person who put it up and explain proper monitoring techniques or email the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society. Or do as Peter and I have done, remove them and relocate the boxes to areas where bluebirds and Tree Swallows will use them.

## **2010 North American Bluebird Society Meeting**

The **Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society** will be the host of the 2010 North American Bluebird Society Meeting. We are planning to hold it in the fall of 2010, probably the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of September. There will be no spring conference that year. At present we have 125 members, by conference time I would like to see us at 200 members. **This means that all of us need to work at getting new members.** I have found one of the best ways to do this is by putting bluebird information (a bluebird brochure) in the mailboxes of people that already have nest boxes on their property. If they have already gone to the trouble of building and setting up the boxes they may be interested in joining the **OEBS**.

**Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society Conservation Award for 2008** A form is included in this newsletter for you to nominate a person or group for this award. This person or group in your opinion has made an outstanding contribution to bluebird conservation in Ontario in 2008.

**OEBS membership** dues of \$10 will be due at the end of each calendar year. Those memberships that are not paid will receive the spring newsletter with another renewal notice. These changes are because of our new constitution.

**Nest Boxes and poles** The OEBS is planning to have nest boxes and mounting poles available for our spring meeting. We have numerous requests but at present do not have a supplier. The cost should be in the 8-10 dollar range for both pole and nest box. More information will be in the spring newsletter.

### **Predator protection for your bluebird trail**

By putting up nest boxes you are creating an artificial situation that does not exist in the wild. Raccoons finding food in one box (adult Tree Swallows and bluebirds and their young) will then visit every box in the area and predate those as well. It is up to you to stop this from happening by making sure all your boxes are predator proof. See our website for more information. [www.oebs.ca](http://www.oebs.ca) Every thing you need to start a bluebird trail can be found on our website. **The Ontario eastern Bluebird Society will not endorse boxes that do not have this protection.**

### **Baillee Birdathon**

**Sylvia Van Walsum** and **William Poaps** were our Birdathon representatives for 2008. They raised a total of \$769.50 (a new record) of which \$ **192.38** will be forwarded back to the OEBS. Thanks again to Sylvia and Bert for being our representatives and for all those individuals who sponsored them.

## Call for Articles

The OEBS needs articles that can be used in the newsletter. Any articles that deal with bluebirds or other cavity nesting birds can be used in our newsletter. I would particularly like to hear from members in Northern Ontario.

### Fall bluebird sightings and prediction for over wintering

The banding station at the tip of Long Point recorded over 300 bluebirds migrating during the last few days of October. David Okines reported 60 bluebirds that passed his banding station near Port Royal during the same time. Bluebirds are very vocal when migrating and are almost always heard before they are seen. Listen for a low pitched *chur-lee* sound as they migrate. The record number of bluebirds recorded in one day was at Holiday Beach on October 27<sup>th</sup> 1991, **825** bluebirds migrated by the hawk watch station that day. The 2008 Hamilton fall bird count held on Sunday November 2<sup>nd</sup> recorded 194 Eastern Bluebirds. With all the wet weather during the breeding season abundant fruit crops were produced. The fruit of Sumac, Red Osier Dogwood and European Buckthorn can be utilized by Eastern Bluebirds. When wild fruit is abundant more bluebirds than normal will attempt to over winter. My prediction is that we will approach the 2002 **Christmas Bird Count** total of **779** Eastern Bluebirds that were recorded on CBC's in Ontario. November so far has been unusually cold with quite a bit of snow. Let's hope the rest of the winter is a mild one.

### Tree Swallows and Cold Snaps

One of the major findings of the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario, 2001-2005*, was the decline in all 6 species of swallows that breed in the province. The cause of these declines is unknown. One hypothesis is that more birds are being killed by cold weather events on the breeding grounds in recent decades. **Environment Canada** and **Bird Studies Canada** are looking for the help of people who have Tree Swallows in their nest boxes to try to learn more about these mortality events.

If you have had Tree Swallows (adults or young) die in nest boxes apparently because of cold weather, could you please provide as much as possible of the following information:

Dates (hopefully exact day) of die-offs and number of adults and young that died. Location (lat/long or UTM of the site, or name of and distance to the nearest town). Stage of nesting (pre-laying, laying, incubation, nestlings, post-fledging). How many birds did not die (could be simply the number of occupied boxes). The number of years with boxes monitored when no die-offs were observed.

Similarly, if you have been monitoring Tree Swallow boxes but have not noted any mortality, then the same information would be useful (years monitored without mortality, number of boxes monitored, location).

We are also interested in anecdotal information about the effects of cold snaps, regardless of whether exact dates are available, and whether or not birds died.

Finally, we would like to obtain data on nest initiation dates over the years, for as far back as your records go.

Thanks for any assistance you can offer. If you have any questions or comments, please let me know.

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## **Bluebirds around the Year in Our Backyard**

Audrey Heagy and David Okines

In fall 2003 we moved into our house on a 50 acre property near St. Williams, Ontario, about 4 km inland from Long Point Bay on Lake Erie. The back half of the property is a deciduous swamp forest, and the front half is mostly rough cattle pasture which hasn't been grazed for more than 10 years and now has a lot of small shrubs and trees. Three of the neighbouring properties are forested conservation lands while one adjoining property is cropped with corn and beans.

The previous owners had installed several bluebird boxes near the house. Our first fall here we regularly saw Eastern Bluebirds around the house and field, with the last record being 4 birds on December 5<sup>th</sup>. (I keep a daily list of birds seen at the bird feeders and in the yard from about November through April).

Our first bluebird record for 2004 was of a male checking out a nest box by the house on February 11<sup>th</sup>. That summer we had one pair nesting in a box outside the kitchen window. For some reason, we didn't record any bluebirds near the house that fall though they were using the fields. Over the winter David made about 10 side-opening nest boxes for Tree Swallows and bluebirds and we put them up on poles in the field.

Our first bluebird record for 2005 was of a male on February 26<sup>th</sup>. Our next record was on March 14<sup>th</sup>, after which we saw bluebirds frequently. That year we had two pairs nest, each with two broods. The first egg was laid on April 17<sup>th</sup>.

In the fall of 2005 we again had up to 5 bluebirds hanging about the yard until 14 November. On 20 December a single bluebird was present, and on January 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006 we recorded two bluebirds. On January 5<sup>th</sup> there was a flock of 15 bluebirds in the yard. After that we began to see bluebirds almost daily.

For some reason we had some live mealworms on hand (probably because David had been using them to catch shrikes) so I began putting mealworms and currants out on a small tray attached to a wooden stand near the bluebird's favorite perches. I didn't record when I started doing this but it was in early January 2006. The bluebirds quickly found the food and we began to move the tray and stand closer to the house each day. Within a few days we regularly had up to six bluebirds feeding from the tray about 20 feet from the kitchen window.

Each morning the birds would appear outside our bedroom window as it was getting light and wait for us to put out about a dozen mealworms which would be rapidly gobbled up. They also ate the currants and raisins but much preferred the mealworms. We also tried a bluebird pudding recipe with suet, peanut butter and raisins which they liked (but so did the juncos, chickadees, and nuthatches).

That summer we had 3 pairs of bluebirds nesting, with the first egg laid on April 16<sup>th</sup>. The pair nesting nearest the house continued to check for food regularly, although we had stopped putting out mealworms regularly once the weather warmed up.

We ramped up our mealworm production in the fall of 2006, anticipating an increase in the number of wintering bluebirds. However, we had only one pair of regular customers and a maximum of 4 bluebirds over the winter of 2006/07.

The over-wintering pair started building a nest in mid-March 2007 but abandoned this nest without laying any eggs. They continued to come in looking for mealworms until sometime in June. A second pair showed up on 15 March, and set up territory at the back of the field but didn't come in to the feeder. In 2007 we had 2 nesting pairs and the first egg was laid on April 7<sup>th</sup>.

In the fall of 2007, the local bluebirds didn't start coming back to the feeders until November 23<sup>rd</sup>, after which up to 6 birds became regular customers. They disappeared for a week in December, when the temperature dropped to -13°C, and disappeared again for shorter periods during three short cold snaps in January 2008. However, during the January thaw bluebirds started building nests in two boxes! These nest attempts were abandoned during construction.

The over-wintering group of three females and one male (all of which were banded) which had been coming to the feeder regularly, disappeared for a few weeks in early February, at the start of a warm spell. On February 14<sup>th</sup> a group of two males and a female were checking out the boxes by the house and on February 16<sup>th</sup> a flock of 8 males and a female landed briefly in the yard (the first flock of migrants).

On February 20<sup>th</sup>, the banded male and two females re-appeared looking for mealworms. This trio was seen in the yard almost daily until the weather warmed up in early April. The two females nested in adjacent boxes not far from the house, with first eggs being laid on April 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>. These females each raised two broods. A third pair showed up in mid-May and successfully nested in a box near the back of the field.

Since August we've been hearing and seeing bluebirds regularly around the house. On a few mornings in September I saw and heard more than twenty bluebirds as I walked the dogs around the field. While bluebirds often hunt for insects from perches in the backyard, we haven't had any "tame" birds coming in looking for handouts this fall.

We won't start putting out mealworms until temperatures get down near freezing (so the mealworms won't crawl away) in late November. Hopefully we will once again be lucky enough to have bluebirds in our backyard all year long.

## A 20th anniversary update

# The trusty sparrow spooker

By E.A. Zimmerman

**M**any bluebird enthusiasts have learned the hard way that House Sparrows are aggressive competitors. House Sparrows often evict native birds from nest boxes, and may break or remove eggs, and kill both nestlings and adults.

To date, no truly sparrow-proof bluebird nest box has been designed, since the smaller House Sparrows can enter any hole a bluebird can fit through. Some nest box styles may not be preferred by House Sparrows, but may still be used, or entered for the purposes of attack.

There are a number of passive and active House Sparrows control methods, ranging from hanging fishing line from boxes, to removal of nests and eggs, to trapping or shooting. Because House Sparrows are non-native birds, federal law allows removal and destruction of their nests, eggs, young and adults. However, passive control methods are more acceptable to many people. Unfortunately, they are also limited in their effectiveness. There is one exception: the sparrow spooker.

It appears that sparrow spookers are virtually 100 percent successful in deterring House Sparrows from entering a nest box, while enabling bluebirds to use the box. Creative bluebirders have come up with a

number of designs, but almost all sparrow spookers use material that flutters over the roof, towards the front of the box. For some reason, this "spooks" House Sparrows. It does not discourage bluebirds from entering the box once they have started laying. In fact, in my experience bluebirds will often perch on the spooker.

The sparrow spooker is installed on the nest box immediately after the first egg is laid. It is removed immediately after fledging, to encourage another brood, and to avoid House Sparrows becoming accustomed to it.

I first learned of the sparrow spooker from Gwen Newton-Denton's webpage at <http://members.tripod.com/%7Eherper/mbahospdeter>. It indicates that Lillian Lund Files, past president of NABS, published a drawing in 1985 of this technique to repel House Sparrows. Since then, many bluebirders have enjoyed favorable results with this clever, yet simple and inexpensive device.

To construct a typical sparrow spooker, you will need:

- A vertical post (e.g., a one-by-one-inch stick of wood, dowel, yardstick, piece of black plumbing hose, or plastic pipe) about a foot long.
- One or two horizontal extensions that will be parallel with the roof in a T, horizontal V or upside-down L

shape relative to the vertical post. The horizontal piece should be long enough to extend to the edge of the roof.

- About three to six strips of flexible, reflective material. Mylar (cut from party banners available at party supply or department stores works well. Mylar from balloons tends to curl up. In a pinch, strips cut from a potato-chip bag made of foil will suffice. Aluminum foil does not work as well, since it does not flutter much and tends to come off.



*Temporary sparrow spooker. Stick in the center attaches to the back of the box. To it are attached the braces from which the "spookers" hang. The drawing on the facing page gives more detail.*

The strips can be attached to the horizontal extension with a glue gun, duct tape, staples, or pulled through a hole and knotted. Use a method that will endure sun, wind and rain for about six or seven weeks

(the typical time period from egg laying to fledging).

Finally, you need a way to affix the spooker to the nest box (e.g., a screw, cable tie, hose clamp or duct tape.)

This need not be a complicated project. I recently made an emergency sparrow spooker in a couple of minutes out of a foil popcorn bag, coffee stirrers, duct tape and two tree branches.

Position the spooker so the horizontal extension(s) are about eight inches above the roof. The strips should fall above the roof (as opposed to extending beyond it over the entrance hole), barely brushing it, so they will move freely in the wind. If the strips are too long, they may not hold up under windy conditions.

I have yet to hear of a case where a bluebird male or female failed to tolerate a sparrow spooker. They may appear fearful initially, but will usually perch on or enter the box within minutes. Occasionally, it may take up to an hour or two.

Putting the spooker up after the first egg is laid ensures that the birds are committed to the nest site. You will also have confirmation of acceptance as long as a new egg is laid the next day, and will not have to worry about interrupting incubation. Avoid installing the spooker when it is very windy, as this may delay acceptance.

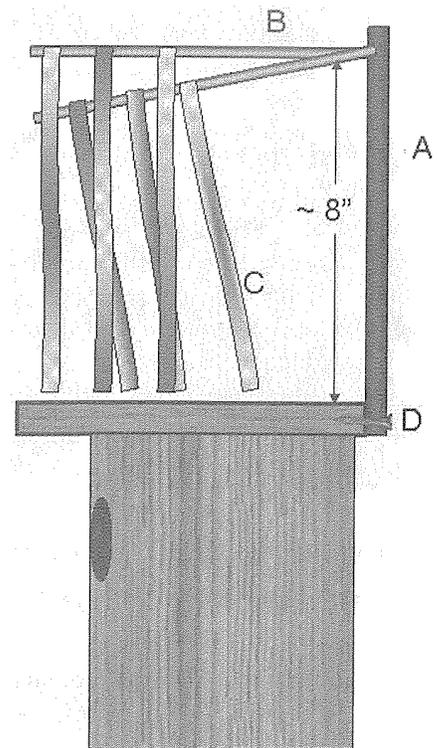
Little information is available about acceptance of sparrow spookers by other cavity- nesters, or at the pre-egg laying stage.

A few people have successfully used sparrow spookers with Tree Swallows. Since titmice and chickadees may be more sensitive to nest site disturbance, a hole restrictor (smaller than 1.25") may be a better choice to protect them from House Sparrows attacks.

One person reported putting sparrow spookers on two nest boxes early — one during bluebird nest building (before an egg was laid), and one before Tree Swallows occupied a box (a previous swallow occupant was killed by House Sparrows).

In both cases, the bluebirds and swallows accepted the "early" spooker and went on to successfully nest. However, as noted above, the spooker is usually installed after the first egg is laid for two reasons: 1) to avoid nest abandonment, and 2) to prevent House Sparrows getting used to it over time, as often happens with fishing line.

I can think of only two real limitations to sparrow spookers. Waiting until the first egg is laid may afford House Sparrows the nerve-wracking opportunity to drive bluebirds away, or trap and kill adults inside the nest box before laying begins. Secondly, its use is probably not feasible on a large bluebird trail. However, I believe a sparrow spooker is an invaluable tool for backyard bluebirders, or those who manage a small trail. It is an extremely effective way to protect nesting bluebirds and their offspring in areas where House Sparrows are abundant.



*(Thanks to Cher and Yvonne Domings for their input on sparrow spookers.)*

*Elizabeth (Bet) Zimmerman is an environmental scientist who maintains several bluebird trails in northeastern Connecticut. She welcomes emails on your experiences with sparrow spookers at [ezdz@charter.net](mailto:ezdz@charter.net). More information on passive and active House Sparrow control methods are available' on her website at [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org).*

*Schematic drawing at right: "A" is the stick attached to the back of the nest box. "B" shows the pair of horizontal braces to which are attached "C", the Mylar strips or other flexible material. Drawing by E.A. Zimmerman.Layton*

Thanks to the North American Bluebird Society for this article.

# Blowfly infestation in Tree Swallows

*Dick Stauffer*

I was banding recently and opened a box with five Tree Swallow nestlings. Four were too old to band but one of them seemed younger than the rest so I decided to band it. Examining the bird revealed a larva hole on the side of the face just below the bill. When I touched the opening the larva retreated inside, but when I put my thumb above the hole the larva exited the bird.



The bird had a total of six larvae burrowed in, one on the cheek, one in the lower part of the head (between the wings), three on the right wing (at the joint) and one on the left wing. All of the blowfly larvae were ejected. I managed to save five larvae. The bird was very lethargic.

I had visited another nest box earlier, when the eggs were just hatching, and had made a note on my schedule that today there would be Tree Swallow nestlings that were the proper age to band.

As soon as I opened this box I knew there was something out of the ordinary. At least three of the nestlings had what looked like a lump on their beaks (an enlargement of the nostril). Banding revealed that the three not only had a nostril enlargement but also signs of eye damage. The eyes were completely closed over. Other than this the nestlings seemed to be in good health. All six nestlings were banded, with a special note of the three deformities.

What was the cause? I had seen an enlarged nostril on a nestling a couple of years earlier, but had not researched the cause. An informal search had come up with a possible cause: chemical exposure.

I sent an email (with pictures) to Myrna Pearman, biologist at Ellis Bird Farm in Alberta, who happened to have a graduate student from the East doing studies on Tree Swallows. The student contacted her professor for his opinion. His best guess was blowfly species *Trypocalliphora braueri*. He recommended that she contact Dr. Terry Whitworth at [www.birdblowfly.com](http://www.birdblowfly.com).

Dr. Whitworth confirmed that the infestation was probably *Trypocalliphora braueri* a subcutaneous species, i.e. it lives under the skin. Larvae initially burrow into nestlings where they may do extensive tissue and organ damage. The enlarged nostril was caused when the larva exited the nestling. Dr. Whitworth asked for the nest and any dead nestlings to be sent to him to confirm his suspicions. He said that generally the larva will eject itself from the nestling before fledging.



**Send me an email at [info@billreadsbooks.com](mailto:info@billreadsbooks.com) and I will send you more colour pictures of Tree Swallows infested with this larva.** Thanks to Ellis Bird Farm for this article.

## Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society Executive

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