

Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

2010 Fall Newsletter Editor Bill Read info@billreadsbooks.com

The AGM is set for **Saturday, March 12th, 2011** at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Ontario.

At the beginning of each year expectations are always high. Will good numbers return, will the weather co-operate, will this be the year that I break my personal record for bluebirds fledged? **The summer of 2010 was not that year.** Unseasonably warm weather in March and April (both months were 3.4 degrees Celsius above the long term average) had bluebirds nesting somewhat earlier in Southern Ontario. Although May was 1.5 degrees above the long term average a cold snap from May 6 to May 13th caused widespread nestling mortality across Ontario. On the 5th and 6th temperatures were below freezing. High winds and precipitation added to the misery. On the Saturday, May 8th winds out of the North West gusted to almost 100 KPH. Many reports were received of dead nestlings and of failed nest attempts. This affected the rest of the breeding season as many of these failed pairs were only able to attempt one more nesting. There were also reports of fewer second nesting's of birds that nested successfully the first time, possibly because the first attempt was delayed due to this cold weather. The nesting season can be classified as below average to average. The rest of the summer was above average in temperature with average rainfall. It was a very warm summer overall but not as warm as 1998.

By most accounts bluebird numbers were down slightly from 2009. This may have been a result of higher than usual mortality on their wintering territories in the United States. Bluebirds that attempted to overwinter in Ontario seem to have done quite well. I expect this coming winter we could see record numbers of bluebirds in Ontario. The warm weather combined with lots of precipitation over the summer has produced an abundant wild berry crop, which could entice more bluebirds than usual to overwinter. The record for Eastern Bluebirds on Christmas Bird counts in Ontario is 779 in 2002. That same year the Hamilton CBC had 52 bluebirds, which is also a record. On this years Hamilton fall count, which took place on Sunday, November 7th, 2010, 129 Eastern Bluebirds were recorded. This should give us some idea of how many bluebirds to expect over the winter. The count takes place on the first Sunday in November so it can be either November 1 or November 7th. This years late fall count may have reduced the number of bluebirds seen. On last years 110th Christmas Bird Counts in Ontario there were 505 Eastern Bluebirds counted from 22 count areas.

The North American Bluebird Society 32nd Annual Conference.

This conference was hosted by the OEBS from September 9-12, 2010. It was held at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington. Thirty-four members of our society attended the conference. It was very successful with excellent field trips and speakers. A special thanks to all those who helped with the organization and running of the event. Our executive committee worked extremely hard to make sure that everything ran smoothly. Many positive comments were heard during and after the conference. One individual commented that this event was in the top one or two of the 20 plus conferences he has

attended. **Pictures of the conference will be posted on our website.** One of the highlights of the conference was the silent auction. (see below).

A Great Silent Auction and Sale Anne Davidson

Our silent auction and bird box sales at the NABS Conference were a great success. The donors were very generous; we had nearly 120 items on the auction tables including 20 Wood Duck, Peterson, natural cavity and OEBS Dorrie boxes provided by Don Wills. In addition, another 25 nest boxes made by Tom Kott and Don Wills were offered for sale.

The most valuable item in the silent auction, entered by Tom and Joan Kott, was a beautiful hand-made, queen-size quilt valued at \$300. This quilt was made by Tom's sister Sue Swayze. Tom and Joan also provided a cuddly lap quilt named Midnight Sky made by Tom's other sister Cathy Darling for the bucket raffle which brought in \$240 from the raffle ticket sales. Thanks to both sisters for these wonderful quilts. Wild Birds Unlimited in Burlington donated a bluebird meal worm feeder and a squirrel proof bird feeder. Wild Birds Unlimited in Guelph donated a bluebird nest box and Grand Valley Fortifiers in Cambridge donated a squirrel proof bird feeder and a bag of bird seed. John Tautin, one of our speakers (Purple Martin Conservation Association), donated a nest box, an inset trap and a Purple Martin cap. Jean Millman donated a hard leather camera lens case.

Jonathan (NABS President) and Lynne Ridgeway provided ten collector plates with bird designs as well as polo shirts and a rolling cooler among other items. Joan Kott and Anne Davidson donated supplies of travel mugs, regular mugs and napkins with bluebird designs. All were valued between \$12 and \$15 and were popular with the bidders. Bill Read provided a selection of books, including a Bateman and a biography of Roger Tory Peterson. Stan Haworth donated a garden croaking toad and a hummingbird feeder. Virginia Hildebrandt gave an orchid and Chris Lyons arrived at the conference with a donation of 6 bluebird nest boxes, a Wood Duck nest box, 2 wren guards, a mealworm feeder and 2 sparrow spookers for the auction. Other interesting submissions were a colourful cart flag, a rain gauge, a tea set, calendars, ornaments and figurines and note cards.

The silent auction began at breakfast and bidding was closed off around 4 p.m. The winning bidders picked up their items before the evening banquet. We had a busy time of it for a couple of hours! The credit card service (set up at the start of the year for the conference registrations) was in heavy use for the auction sales which totaled about \$2,000, nearly half of which were paid by credit card. Everyone seemed to have a lot of fun bidding and went home happy with their treasures.

Award Presentations during the conference.

Chris Lyons of Port Hope was awarded the **2009** bluebird conservation award for his work with bluebirds and other cavity nesting species in the Port Hope area. This award was given out during the Friday evening presentation by Bill Read. Chris has been very generous to OEBS over the years. He brought with him as a donation to the silent auction, one Wood Duck box, 6 bluebird boxes, 2 wren guards, a meal worm feeder and 2

sparrow spookers. Both the legendary Don Wills and John Tautin executive director of the Purple Martin Conservation Association in Pennsylvania each bought 2 of his bluebird boxes. Thanks again Chris for your contribution and continuing work with native cavity nesters.

During the banquet on Saturday night **Don Bissonnette** accepted the OEBS bluebird conservation award for **2010** on behalf of the **Essex County Field Naturalists bluebird committee**. This award is usually given out during our annual meeting the following spring. Our committee decided it could be awarded during the banquet. Don has been the driving force behind the Essex County Field Naturalists bluebird committee. It was a pleasure to have him in attendance and to be able to present the award to him. Keep up the good work Don.

An award is given out each year to an individual or group that has made an outstanding contribution to bluebird conservation during the previous year.

Recipient	Year
George Coker *	1995
Leo Smith *	1996
Hazel Bird *	1997
Don Wills	1998
Sheldon Anderson* and Doug Harrison*	1999
Norm Shantz	2000
Robert Burton	2001
Halton Bluebird Club	2002
Herb Furniss and Don Parkes	2003
Glanbrook Conservation Committee	2004
Joe Hurst*	2005
Barc Dowden Ottawa Duck Club	2006
Gerry Powers	2007
Ken Reger	2008
Chris Lyons	2009
Don Bissonnette	2010

* deceased

No awards were given out by the North American Bluebird Society during this conference.

Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society Brochures

Thanks to **TD Canada Trust** for providing the funding for the printing of 10,000 new brochures. I have included one brochure with your newsletter. See if you can find someone to give it to who might be interested in joining our society.

History of the Eastern Bluebird in Ontario – Bill Read

During the North American Bluebird Society conference in September 2010 hosted by OEBS I gave a talk on the History of the Eastern Bluebird in Ontario. During my research I visited the main public reference library in Toronto to research some of their documents and to view the **Audubon Elephant folio print of the Eastern Bluebird**. They have a complete set of all 485 hand coloured prints which are valued at around 12 million dollars. Prior arrangements can be made to view any of the prints as each one is separately bound to protect them. The bluebird print shows a male separately and a female feeding a young bird perched on a mullein plant. The colour was exceptional and well worth the visit. I had them make a photograph of the Eastern Bluebird that I used in my presentation.

A short summary of parts of my talk

In 1889 the United States Department of Agriculture published a 400 page bulletin on the English Sparrow in America. The author of the Bulletin No 1 advises the extermination of the sparrow all over the United States. Sparrow clubs were organized across the U.S. for their extinction and in some states bounties were paid for House Sparrows. In 1892 the different county treasurers of Illinois paid out in round figures \$8,000.00 as bounty money under a law allowing 2 cents for the head of each sparrow killed during December, January and February in that state. This shows that about 450,000 sparrows were killed which made little impact on the population. Unfortunately some native sparrows were included with the House Sparrows. Young children killed these birds to earn money for hard candy. They quickly learned to wait till the young had hatched in order to quadruple their bounty. In Ontario similar methods were employed to rid the countryside of House Sparrows. A note in the Brampton Conservator on 28 February, 1902 described a sparrow shooting contest held that month at Streetsville, after which the winning side entertained the losers with an oyster supper at the Royal Hotel. The successful side bagged upwards of 3000 sparrows.

House Sparrow populations peaked some time between 1900 and 1920 and have declined ever since. When automobiles replaced horses especially in the cities, available grain, which was the House Sparrow's chief food supply diminished. House Sparrows impacted Eastern Bluebirds in urban areas but bluebirds were still common to abundant in the outlying areas where they nested in old apple trees and in fence posts on rural

farms and in natural cavities. Nash in 1910 states that they still exist in undiminished numbers. In March of 1913 he saw many thousands passing over Toronto from west to east. He did notice a decline in the immediate Toronto area around the time of writing and relates this to changes in Agricultural practices. Our modern wire fencing has taken the place of the old stake and rider fence which has deprived them of a favourite nesting place.

Bluebirds continued to be fairly common into the early 1940's and started to decline after that. One of the major reasons for the decline in my opinion was the expansion of the European Starling into rural areas around this time. This had a major impact on the bluebird by decreasing further the number of available nest cavities. Native cavity nesters were now competing with the starling for fewer available cavities. From this time until about 1980 bluebirds continued to decline. Beginning in the 1950's bluebirds failed to rebound to their former numbers in the years following weather related declines.

Starting around 1945 starlings began roosting in towns and cities across Southern Ontario. Non lethal efforts to move them to areas outside these towns and cities were futile. Finally many jurisdictions resorted to using shotguns to dissuade them. One such shoot occurred in Hamilton. Controller Sam Baggs organized a major shoot for January 25, 1954 in Gore Park, Hamilton. 122 hunters armed with shotguns were brought in and started blasting. About 5,000 birds were shot at each shoot. A second shoot took place on February 2, 1954. Further shoots were planned twice a week until the end of April. J.L.Baillie, research assistant in the division of ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum estimated the flocks in Hamilton totaled 2 million starlings. In response to these lower bluebird numbers nest box programs were initiated during this period by naturalist clubs across Ontario. Many were not successful because they lacked predator proofing. Dennis Barry and James Richards established a very successful nest box project in the Oshawa-Scugog area in 1967. From 1967-1969-734 bluebirds fledged from this trail. Dennis made the following observations. It appears that a high proportion of broods are fledged successfully during the first year of operation of such a project, but predation increases rapidly during subsequent years and nesting success decreases accordingly. **Since building a nest box which is completely predator proof seems an impossibility, the boxes in any successful nest box project will have to be made inaccessible to predators by the use of some type of metal protector or support. The OEBS will not endorse any nest box trail that lacks this predator proofing.**

Warmer weather during the three decades starting with the 1980's and an increase in predator proof nest box trails across Ontario has resulted in a population increase for the Eastern Bluebird. The second Ontario breeding bird atlas completed in 2005 found bluebirds in 1,237 of 1,824 squares within the 47 atlas regions- almost 500 more than the previous atlas (1981-1985). We are now seeing rebounds in bluebird numbers to their former level following weather related declines. This is illustrated in the Christmas Bird Counts that are held through out North America. The ice storm of early April 2003 caused wide spread adult mortality of both Tree Swallows and bluebirds resulting in a decline of 35% on the following 104th (60,768) CBC from the previous year's 103rd CBC total of 93,076. In three years after this weather related decline 95,077 bluebirds were recorded on the 107th CBC. This recovery within three years is a good sign that there is a healthy population of bluebirds in North America. Based on point counts

carried out during the atlas the Ontario population of the Eastern Bluebird is now estimated at 40,000 individuals.

How can we help Tree Swallows survive unseasonably cold temperatures? (Reprinted from the Bluebird –Fall 2009, Vol- 31 No 4).

A period of unseasonably cold temperatures in the spring of 2007 in Western New York caused the deaths of many birds. These authors documented the loss of 216 Tree Swallows, most of which were found in a series of 122 nest boxes. The boxes were installed for nesting Eastern Bluebirds, but the swallows sought refuge in them to escape the cold. They also huddled together to conserve heat, but the authors found as many as 15 dead Tree Swallows in a single box. Even though this cold-weather event was unusual, the authors suggest that managers of nest box programs install roosting boxes to provide swallows and other birds a refuge from the cold.

Hess,P.J; C.G.Zenger, and R.A. Schmidt.2008. Weather related Tree Swallow mortality and reduced nesting effort. Northeastern Naturalist 15: 630-631

Editor' note I remember the spring of 2007 quite well, April was 1.4 Celsius colder than the long term average. There was a period of two straight weeks where the temperature was colder than average every day. The cold finally ended on April 19th but by that time it was too late for some early returning Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds. I found 15 dead Tree Swallows, 6 in one box, one of which was banded by David Lamble of Fergus. That year the first Tree Swallow was seen at Long Point on March 23rd and on my trail near ST.George on March 26th. Don Wills found 4 dead Eastern Bluebirds in his boxes near Caledonia.

Other areas of Eastern North America fared far worse than Ontario-John Rogers from New York reported he found 14 dead bluebirds in his boxes that spring. In one box John found 2 dead males and one dead female. All were emaciated but with no other apparent damage. He also found 227 dead Tree Swallows in his boxes on his trail at the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge. John also received an email from Barry Parker from Henderson New York who reported finding 51 dead Tree Swallows in one box. Early spring can be a difficult time for bluebirds as most of the edible berries have been eaten by this time and they must rely more heavily on insects. Gerrard. S .Powers has had some success feeding Tree Swallows with black currents in early spring. For bluebirds a meal worm feeder would help as long as you can get them to come to it. It works better if you have over wintering bluebirds that are already coming to your feeder. (See our website for a special deal on 10,000 mealworms for OEBS members) The new arrivals might be guided to the feeder by the over wintering birds. It certainly helps to have a roosting box that is air tight except for the entrance hole. Since heat rises it is better to have the entrance hole at the bottom of the box with perches inside near the top. Having said all this it does not matter how sealed the nest box if we have a prolonged cold period with all the edible berries gone and no insects they will not survive. This happens from time to time

as it did in 2003 during the ice storm and in 2007 with a prolonged cold spell in April. Bluebirds have recovered fairly quickly from these losses especially with so many predator proof nest boxes on bluebird trails in Ontario.

Reports from the field - 2010

Nest Box reports needed for the newsletter. If you send me your report I will make sure to put it in the newsletter.

Pat Duncan Brereton Field Naturalists club (Barrie, ON) had 10 bluebirds fledge from their 28 boxes in Simcoe County. Boxes were located on golf courses, pasture land and the road side.

Gerard Powers fledged 223 bluebirds from his 210 boxes in Grey County and 9 young from 50 boxes in Bruce County. Gerard reports that he had another year of lower production. There was snow on the ground on May 8th which resulted in failed nests and much later nesting resulting in fewer second broods. Overall Gerard had 45 pairs of bluebirds which produced 232 young or 5.16 bluebirds per pair.

Don Wills had 108 pair which produced 517 fledged young. This represents 4.79 young per pair. This is down from other years and off his record of 721 in 1998. Don also had an estimated 325 nests of Tree Swallows fledge, one nest of Kestrels and many Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers. The cold spell from May 6-13 resulted in at least 47 dead nestlings. Even though the rest of the summer was warm many pairs only nested once. Second broods were down from previous years. Don for the first time ever had a pair of Great Crested Flycatchers nest in one of his bluebird boxes. We were amazed that they were able to fit in. Don bought two of Chris Lyons deep boxes and he intends to enlarge the hole slightly for the fly catchers.

Your newsletter writer **Bill Read** fledged 269 bluebirds from 51 pairs. This includes 11 bluebirds that were saved from failed nests. After years of doing this I can tell very quickly when the bluebird young will not survive if something is not done. Excluding these 11 this represents 51 pairs and 258 fledged or **5.06** fledged young per pair. All 11 were fostered into Tree Swallow nests as it was difficult to find bluebirds of the same age at the time of removal. You must make sure the Tree Swallows are the same size so they are not out competed for food and that there are no more than 6 nestlings (bluebirds plus Tree Swallows) after fostering. All of the Tree Swallow young that received bluebird young survived and most of the bluebirds. Before fledging the bluebird young were put in other bluebird nests. On first broods alone I had 16 failed nests with around 64 dead nestlings. I had one nest where a bluebird laid 5 eggs after which some thing happened to the adult female. A second year Tree Swallow took over the nest box and laid one egg and then began incubating the bluebird and Tree Swallow eggs. All of the eggs hatched except one bluebird egg which was infertile. The Tree Swallow hatched about 2 days after the bluebirds and was much smaller. After 4 days I moved the bluebirds to one of Don Wills nest boxes where the female had laid 2 sets of infertile eggs. We removed the infertile eggs and put in the four young with some of the broken egg shells. By all

accounts the new parents were delighted. They very quickly started feeding the fostered young. All four fledged successfully.

Anne Melady reports that 12 pair of Tree Swallows nested successfully in her 28 boxes in Huron County. The last ones left on August 5th. Anne attended the NABS conference in Burlington and very much enjoyed it.

Felix Ventresca and **Aurelio Munoz** had another successful year with 114 bluebirds and 251 Tree Swallows fledged. From 1999 to 2010 this trail has fledged 840 bluebirds. This trail is located in Short Hills Provincial Park in Niagara. All support poles are greased to stop mammalian predators. For a summary of this trail see the article on The Eastern Bluebird in Niagara by Bradley Clements and Bill Read in the **Birds of Niagara** by **John Black and Kayo Roy**.

Joe Kral from Guelph had another successful year with 112 bluebirds, 1713 Tree Swallows, 162 House Wrens and 43 Black Capped Chickadees fledge from his boxes. Joe has 535 boxes all located in Wellington County. This is the first time Joe had over 2000 total fledged young. Since 1995 his total fledged young of all species is 24,426. Not a single nest was predated by raccoons, opossums or house cats-a very encouraging situation. This is because of proper management and the use of predator protection on all boxes. Joe reports 22-23 pairs of bluebirds which represents 4.87-5.09 fledged young per pair. Most bluebirders in 2010 had around 5 young per pair on their trails.

What are some typical values for raccoon density, movements and survival (reprinted from the Bluebird – fall 2010 Vol 32 No 4).

Raccoons are one of the most successful carnivores in North America. Their intelligence, adaptability and broad tastes all contribute to this success. However to the dismay of nest box monitors, raccoons include cavity nesting birds and eggs in their diet. Some basic facts might be helpful to nest box monitors.

As part of a long term study in **Ontario** looking at disease transmission by raccoons (which can carry rabies, distemper, and other diseases), the authors of this study captured more than 155,000 raccoons. The raccoons were fitted with ear tags and some received radio collars or GPS units to allow tracking of their movements. Some of the findings:

The average density in Southern Ontario was 3.4-14.6 raccoons per square kilometer (8.8-35.2 per square mile).

The average density in Northern Ontario was less than 1.5 per square kilometer (about 3.9 per square mile).

A raccoon's home range is about 3.6 square kilometers (1.4 square miles).

Ontario raccoons only live about 3 years, with predation, collisions with cars, and removal by animal-control officials being the leading cause of death.

Because of their adaptability and high reproductive rate, raccoon populations are able to bounce back quickly after being reduced.

The authors compared their numbers with those of studies done in other parts of North America. Values for raccoon densities vary widely, partly due to differences in

methodology but also due to differences in habitat. Still, the values for Ontario appear to be fairly representative for raccoons in the northern part of their range.

Rosate, Rick, Mark Ryckman, Karen Ing, Sarah Proceviat, Mike Allan, Laura Bruce, Dennis Donovan, and J.Chris Davies 2010. Density, Movements and Survival of Raccoons in Ontario, Canada: Implications for disease spread and management. *Journal of Mammalogy* 91:122-135.

Editor's note The raccoon population in Ontario is at an all time high. The demand for raccoon pelts is very low at present. During the early part of the last century raccoons were heavily trapped for their pelts which lowered their numbers considerably. In Lyle Friesen's talk on Wood Thrush at the NABS conference he stated that the raccoon was the number one predator of Wood Thrush nests. The whole idea behind bluebirding is to provide a nest box that will not be predated by mammalian predators like the raccoon. Some individuals place an extra thickness of wood over the entrance hole, this is not a deterrent to raccoons who can reach into the nest box and it also lessens the chance of occupancy by bluebirds as it makes it more difficult to enter. Other individuals lower the nest as bluebirds will build to the top of the entrance hole for easier access. Raccoons are very adept at reaching at least 10 inches into the nest box for an easy meal of a bluebird female or young. **The best way to protect boxes in Ontario is by greasing the poles or using stove pipe baffles or cone guards to protect your bluebirds. There is an obligation on your part to do this since you have enticed the bluebirds to nest in your nest box.**