

2005 Spring Newsletter

The 16th annual general meeting of the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society will be held on March 12, 2005 at The Royal Botanical Gardens headquarters in Burlington Ontario.

Our feature speaker is Rina Nichols from Wildlife Preservation Trust Canada, who will discuss her work with the loggerhead shrike recovery program. Don Wills will show us how to raise mealworms and Bill Read will discuss EABL population changes over the last 15 years.

Fewer EABL's were reported overwintering this year than in previous years. Hank Zuzek, from Vineland, saw 8 bluebirds in early February. Winter temperatures have been at or slightly above long term averages. Numbers of EABL's on fall counts and Christmas bird counts were down in 2004-2005. This is probably a reflection of lower numbers of EABL's in the province as a direct result of the 2003 April ice storm in eastern North America. We will be better able to assess this when bluebirds start returning in the spring of 2005. Dennis Lewington (Sauble Beach area) and George Coker from Beamsville on the Niagara Peninsula, said that numbers were down by one-half in 2004. Weather continues to be the number one factor affecting both breeding and overwintering success.

Bucket Raffle

As in previous years, a bucket raffle will be held. Anyone wishing to donate a prize should bring it to the meeting. Money raised helps offset the cost of hosting the meeting.

Registration Fee

There will be a registration fee of \$5.00 for both members and non-members.

Lunch Arrangements

Coffee, tea and donuts will be served. There are two restaurants nearby and the garden café downstairs. Pizza can be ordered in if enough request it at registration.

Parking

Parking day permits will be given to each person who registers. This will allow you to park free for the day. Next year we may have to pay a small fee to obtain the permits. RBG said they would let us know before the meeting what next year's cost will be.

OEBS Website

Mike Sullivan has set up a posting board on our website. I would encourage anyone to put on your comments, sightings, etc with respect to bluebirds. The website can be accessed at OntarioEasternBluebirdSociety.org. The last five years of OEBS newsletters and a list of county co-ordinators will be put on our website in the very near future.

OEBS Agenda

Saturday March 12, 2005

9:00 – 9:30 a.m. Registration
9:30 – 10:00 a.m. Business Meeting
Introductions – Bill Read
Membership Report – Marion Laing
Conservation Director's Report – Don Wills
OEBS Website Report – Mike Sullivan
Treasurer's Report – Bill Read
OEBS Conservation Award – Don Wills

10:00 – 10:30 a.m. How to Grow Mealworms – Don Wills and Larry Broadbent
10:30 – 11:00 a.m. Coffee Break
11:00 – 11:15 a.m. EABL population changes over the last 15 years – Bill Read
11:15 – 12:00 noon Individual Nestbox Reports
12:00 – 1:30 p.m. Lunch
1:30 - 2:30 p.m. Feature Speaker – Rina Nichols, Presentation on the loggerhead shrike recovery program
2:30 – 3:00 p.m. Coffee Break
3:00 – 3:15 p.m. Video – Bluebirds inside the nestbox
3:15 – 4:00 p.m. Bucket Raffle Draw

Mealworm Colony Info

Don Wills

For the last 2 years, bluebirders were fortunate to buy mealworms from Cricket Village. This wholesaler gave us a great deal at ½ cent per mealworm. At our local pet store, mealworms are sold for 8 cents a piece. Unfortunately, Cricket Village has stopped handling mealworms for this year forcing us to cultivate our own colonies. Larry Broadbent from the Chatham area has gathered lots of info from the internet and started a successful colony. He gave me approximately 2,000 mealworms with plastic containers in early November and my colony has now gone through the cycle with young mealworms hatching on January 15, 2005. Larry or I will be able to give a more detailed report with the plastic containers, types of food and hopefully beetles at the March 12th meeting.

Christmas and fall bird counts as an indicator of EABL population changes

Bill Read

Over the last fifteen years, Ontario has witnessed a significant increase in the number of overwintering Eastern Bluebirds (see tables). There are more count areas and counters than there were fifteen years ago, but this alone only partially accounts for this increase. Does this represent an actual increase in the bluebird population or are just more bluebirds overwintering because of the warmer weather? Overwintering EABL's feed on berries especially sumac and winter active insects. My sense is that warm weather is not the primary factor that keeps bluebirds from migrating, but available edible berries along with insect activity and warmer weather.

All counts recorded record high numbers of EABL's in the fall of 2002 (103rd count). The Hamilton count recorded 328 EABL's on Sunday November 3, 2002 followed by a December 26, 2002 Hamilton Audubon Christmas bird count of 52. The 103rd Audubon Christmas bird counts for Ontario recorded 779 EABL's from December 14, 2002 to January 5, 2003 (157 more than the 100th count which reported 622). The Cambridge count reported 71 EABL's on the 103rd that dropped to 9 on the 104th and 0 on the 105th. The 103rd Audubon Christmas bird counts for Michigan recorded 3150 EABL's.

Anecdotal information from bluebirders supports the view that when fruit bearing shrubs or trees produce little fruit, bluebirds migrate earlier, as they apparently have done in the fall of 2004. The warm fall weather alone did not entice more bluebirds to overwinter. EABL's can tolerate very cold weather (-28oC) as long as they have an adequate food source.

The difficulty arises with ice storms. The 2003 April ice storm was devastating to EABL's since most had already returned by that date. Many reports were received of bluebirds before, but not after the ice storm. One trail reported 13 dead adults after the ice storm. In Southern Ontario, the ground was covered with 7-8 inches of an ice snow mixture for five or six days, making it impossible for EABL's to pick insects off the ground. Most edible berries had been removed by other birds by this time. In summary, it's my personal view that the EABL population reached a high point in the fall of 2002 and has since declined by as much as 50% as a direct result of the 2003 ice storm. Poor overwintering success of our migrants in the United States may also be a factor. With better weather during the breeding season and no more ice storms, the population should recover to the fall 2002 level in a few years.

Hamilton Ontario Canada Fall Bird Count First Sunday in November	
Year	# of EABL's
2004	42
2003	76
2002	328
2001	113
2000	127
1999	137
1998	204
1997	83
1996	142
1995	92
1994	116
1993	8
1992	20
1991	64
1990	12
1989	6
1988	3
1987	6
1986	13
1985	2
1984	0
1983	23
1982	132
1981	2
1980	3
1979	4
1978	0
1977	0
1976	1
1975	6
1974	0

**Hamilton Audubon
Christmas Bird Counts
held Dec 26 each year**

Year	# EABL's
2004	13
2003	13
2002	52
2001	10
2000	11
1999	23
1998	26
1997	45
1996	CW
1995	3
1994	6
1993	0
1992	3
1991	13
1990	6
1989	10
1988	5
1987	10
1986	4
1985	0
1984	3
1983	0
1982	1
1972-1981	0
1971	2
1961-1970	0
1960	2
1950-1959	0

**Cambridge Christmas Bird
Count results for Eastern
Bluebird**

Year	Eastern Bluebird
1977	0
1978	0
1979	0
1980	1
1981	2
1982	0
1983	0
1984	0
1985	4
1986	0
1987	0

1988	0
1989	4
1990	0
1991	0
1992	0
1993	0
1994	0
1995	0
1996	5
1997	7
1998	25
1999	62
2000	4
2001	15
2002	71
2003	9
2004	0

103rd Ontario Christmas Bird Count for the Eastern Bluebird

Circle Name	# Reported
West Elgin, ON	96
Cedar Creek, ON	79
Woodhouse Township, ON	79
Cambridge, ON	71
Long Point, ON	65
St. Catharines, ON	60
Hamilton, ON	52
St. Thomas, ON	43
Niagara Falls, ON	38
Fisherville, ON	33
Port Colborne, ON	24
Strathroy, ON	23
Wallaceburg, ON	20
Belleville, ON	17
Blenheim, ON	13
Presqu'île P.P., ON	12
Port Hope-Cobourg, ON	12
London, ON	9
Kettle Point, ON	8
Napanee, ON	6
Brockville Area, ON	6
Woodstock, ON	4
Thousand Islands, ON	4
Toronto, ON	2
Peel-Halton Counties, ON	2
Amherst Island, ON	1

The count data for all of Ontario was obtained from the internet using <http://birdsource.cornell.edu/cbc/>. Thanks to Bill Lamond, Mike Street and Ted Cheskey for providing information on both Hamilton counts and the Cambridge count. The Hamilton Christmas bird count is held each year on December 26. The Hamilton fall count is always the first Sunday In November. Counts for the rest of Ontario range from December 14 – January 5. The 103rd count was from December 14, 2002 to January 5, 2003.

Disaster in Amador County: Nestboxes become Lunchboxes

By Hatch Graham

Rains poured in late December and early January then flowed out over saturated soils. The Mokelumne and Cosumnes rivers were in flood stage. Gophers, mice and rabbits couldn't find high ground and were lost. Frogs and other amphibians were washed away. By March, the raccoon population was near starving. Then the bluebirds arrived. Since 1980, when Don Jenkins placed 50 nestboxes on the Highway 124 right-of-way fence, the Western blues have prospered. When the swallows began to use the boxes, Don paired many of them to accommodate both species. Later in the season, the Ash-throated Flycatchers often take over one of the box pairs.

Since we began monitoring the trail in 1994, there's always been some raccoon predation. After two years of losing birds in one section of the trail, we installed hanging boxes a la Dick Purvis in Orange County. Seven boxes 4 ft high on the fence were replaced by seven hanging in the blue oaks from 10 to 20 ft high early this year. It was a good thing. Otherwise our total output for the year would have been negative. As it was, here is the sad record of our highway 124 trail: We fledged 21 bluebirds from 66 boxes but lost 17 adults to raccoons. Only 4 swallows were fledged while 11 adults succumbed. Seven fly-catchers fledged while 5 adults were taken. In addition to 34 adults massacred, we had 9 chicks grown to the size where their wings were spit on the ground.

Raccoons grab the birds from the nest and bite off the wings leaving them on the ground in front of the box. Wings and feathers at the box are almost a sure sign of a raccoon. A feral cat will kill or wound the bird by biting it in the back of the neck but then will carry the bird away. As I said, It's good we had the hanging boxes. Of the 21 blues fledged, 10 were from the hangers; all 4 swallows were from the trees; and 4 of the 7 flycatchers were also. In addition, we had two clutches of House Wrens amounting to 15 fledged from the hanging boxes.

I've been doing some real soul-searching to determine what to do. Don Yoder swears by the Noel Coon Guard. I know the hanging boxes work and on other trails I've erected elevator poles for people with house cats with relatively good success. The elevator pole or post was written up a couple of years ago by Paul Chance in Sialia. It consists of a 4.5 to 5 ft length of 2" PVC pipe into which is inserted a 5 ft length of 1-1/2" PVC. The box is mounted to the top of the 1-1/2" pipe. When telescoped down, the side-opening box is easily monitored. Then the inner pipe is elevated up about 4-1/2 feet and the pipe secured in its elevated position with a

nail slide through holes drilled through the set of pipes. Now the box is approximately 9 ft high.

I've recently been advised that the electrical metallic tubing (EMT) or thinwall pipe is an excellent mount for raccoons. It is usually placed about 7-1/2 ft high. This requires a ladder or stool to monitor. This would be okay in a level area but not in the rough terrain along Hwy 124.

Then I tried adapting Chance's Elevator Post to the EMT. A 1/2 section slips easily into a 3/4" section. It's a little harder drilling holes but I'm building 46 boxes on elevator posts and upping my hangers to 20. CalTrans is issuing us an encroachment permit for the right-of-way so our investment will be protected.

By the way, the cost of the EMT or thinwall pipe is nominal. It comes in 10 ft lengths. Pipe enough for two boxes costs about \$5.50. I find them easier to construct than to retrofit with Noel guards, and there remains the concern that the boxes with the guards on may be less acceptable. We'll see.

Editor's Note – Refer to article Disaster in Amador County

I have included this article to show bluebirders what can happen when your boxes are not protected against predators. Free standing metal poles or t-bars protected by greasing or stove pipe guards under the box will effectively stop climbing predators. When you put up boxes, you are creating an artificial situation that does not exist in the wild. There is absolutely no excuse to allow this kind of predation to occur. This is a conservation effort with the objective of fledging more Eastern Bluebirds than would normally fledge in the wild. Fence posts, trees, etc. provide easy access to predators. It is up to bluebirders to provide fully protected boxes on your trail. The OEBS will not endorse nestbox trails that do not meet these standards. Unprotected, unmonitored nestboxes do more harm than good and should be removed to allow bluebirds to find natural cavities.