

2006 Spring Newsletter

The 17th Annual General Meeting of the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society will be held Saturday March 18th, 2006 at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Ontario.

Our feature speaker is Kay McKeever from the Owl Rehabilitation Foundation who will discuss her work with barn owls.

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 \$6.00 for both members and non-members.

Lunch Arrangements

Coffee, tea, donuts and muffins will be served. There are two restaurants nearby and the gardens cafe downstairs. You can bring your own lunch and eat upstairs. That will allow time to walk through the indoor gardens.

Parking

Parking day permits will be given to each person who registers. This will allow you to park free for the day. The Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society will pay for the parking permits.

OEBS Agenda Saturday March 18, 2006	
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 Treasurer's Report - Bill Read OEBS Conservation Award - Don Wills
10:00 - 10:30 a.m.	Nestbox Reports
10:00 - 10:30 a.m.	Coffee Break
10:30 - 11:00 a.m.	History of Eastern Bluebirds in the Hamilton study area - Bill Read
11:15 - 12:00 noon	Update on Prothonotary Warblers - Don Wills
12:00 - 1:30 p.m.	Lunch
1:30 - 2:30 p.m.	Feature Speaker - Kay McKeever Owl Rehabilitation Foundation
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

More EABL's were reported overwintering, in 2005-2006 than in the previous two years. December's temperatures started on a record cold pace but started to get warmer on December 21st and stayed warm right through until the beginning of February. Overall December 2005 was a very cold month even with the warm period over the holidays. January was the warmest on record in the last 100 years. Senior Climatologist at the environment Canada weather office, David Phillips said the average temperature for January 2005 was 0oC over 7oC higher than the long term average. It was more like March with only 2 days below the average temperature range on January 27 and 28. The average daily high for January 2006 of 2.3oC was 5.1oC higher than December's 2005 average daily high of -2.8oC¹.

January 2006 had higher than average precipitation with three times more rain and only half the average snowfall. Long Point Bay remained open. February was much colder and near the average or slightly below. The number of cold days (-15oC or less) will be well below the Long term average. This should increase the probability that more eastern bluebirds will overwinter successfully to breed in 2006.

1. *Temperatures recorded at the Waterloo Weather Station.*

**Measured at the Hamilton Airport Weather Station
Winter December 1 - March 31**

	1960's	1970's	1980's	1990's
Average temperature for the decade (includes both highs and lows)	-4.2oC	-4.2oC	-3.5oC	-3.0oC
Average number of cold days (-15C or below) per decade per year	21	18	17	15

Winter Sightings of Eastern Bluebirds

Trudy Cable, who lives in Waterford about 7 miles north of Lake Erie, had four bluebirds at her feeder for at least 4 days in mid-December. She was feeding them a deluxe bird seed with no corn. They stayed for about 20 minutes and returned for at least 4 days. With a different mixture of currants or raisins or mealworms or special bluebird meal, you could possibly have them return all winter. Very few reports are received of bluebirds coming to feeders in Ontario.

Our website (www.oeps.ca) gallery shows a male bluebird eating mealworms from a frying pan. These pictures were taken last winter 2004-2005 near Port Hope Ontario just east of Toronto. They were submitted by Mike Sullivan.

Linda Thrower reported bluebirds throughout the winter. Linda reported two EABL's at Ruthven Park near Cayuga on February 21, 2006 and 5 EABL's at Appleby and Britannia in Burlington on February 5th. This sighting is close to the Halton Bluebird trail at Bronte Creek Provincial Park. Bill Read saw 4 EABL's on December 13 just south of Cayuga and 4 EABL's just north of Port Rowan on January 26, 2006. Don Wills reported 25 EABL's on January 21st close to his boxes near Carluke. Hank Zuzak, near Beamsville, found at least 4 EABL's roosting in a nestbox when he opened it at 5:15 p.m. on February 28, 2006. He closed it up quickly and the bluebirds stayed for the night.

Current Eastern Bluebird Population Levels

Highly volatile weather in this decade has resulted in fluctuating Bluebird numbers. The Eastern Bluebird population in Ontario probably reached its highest point in the last 60 years in the fall of 2002 but has since declined. The period from November 1, 2001 to March 31, 2002 was the warmest on record at -1.1oC. David Phillips (pers. comm.) has referred to this period as the year without winter. This allowed more Bluebirds to survive over the winter to breed in 2002. Peak numbers were recorded on both the Hamilton Fall Bird Count and the Hamilton Christmas Bird Count (CBC) of 2002. Conversely, the ice storm of early April 2003 killed many Eastern Bluebirds in the Hamilton Study Area. Don Wills removed 13 dead adult Eastern Bluebirds after the storm and Bill Read removed three dead adults from his boxes near St. George. Loretta Mousseau near Cayuga reported several pairs of Bluebirds before the ice storm and none after. Fortunately, the winter of 2005-2006 has been one of the warmest on record which should allow more Bluebirds to survive to breed in 2006.

2. History of Eastern Bluebirds in the Hamilton study area by Bill Read to be included in Birds in Hamilton sponsored by the Hamilton Naturalists Club.

The second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (2001-2005) found Bluebirds in 1,248 squares within the 47 regions of Ontario - almost 500 more than the 1981 - 1985 atlas. An estimate of 2 - 10 pairs per square would represent a range of 2,496 to 12,480 pairs of Eastern Bluebirds in Ontario at the end of the breeding season in 2005. Given the weather related declines of the last few years, I would estimate the population to be at the lower end of that range. With warmer weather both on their wintering grounds and during the breeding season, and access to predator proof nestboxes, Eastern Bluebirds should recover to 2002 levels within a few years.

Doug Tarry Young Ornithologist's Workshop Attention Parents and Keen Teen Birders!!

The 2006 Young Ornithologist's Workshop will be held at Long Point Bird Observatory from Friday July 28 to Sunday August 6, 2006. This intensely-packed week of activities focuses on field ornithology and includes bird banding, censussing, field identification, birding field trips, guest lectures, and more much!

Come make new friends from across the country with similar interests in the world of birds. Six lucky applicants (ages 13-17) will be selected for the Doug Tarry Bird Study. Awards and recipients will have all expenses (except travel costs) paid. Applications are due April 30, 2006. For additional information and an application form, contact: Landbirds Programs Coordinator at Bird Studies Canada (email: lpbo@bsc-eoc.org), or visit the BSC web site (www.bsc-eoc.org/lpbo/yow.html).

Getting to the bottom of winter bluebird diets Nest-box droppings tell the story By Kevin L. Berner

Most bluebird enthusiasts concentrate their efforts towards providing and monitoring nest boxes during the spring and summer each year. These efforts have helped to reverse the long-term bluebird declines throughout much of the U.S. and Canada. Much less attention has been paid to bluebirds outside of the nesting season.

Winter foods are very important for bluebirds if they are to go into the nesting season at optimum levels of health. I have attempted to identify key winter foods used by bluebirds in upstate New York.

While there are published plans for bluebird roosting boxes, I have not been able to find evidence that these large boxes with internal perches are readily used by bluebirds. Discussions with many individuals at NABS and state bluebird conferences have led me to believe that roosting boxes as described in bluebird books are rarely used.

However, bluebirds frequently do roost in nest boxes in the winter. It is well documented that individuals or groups of bluebirds will crowd into nest boxes on winter nights. Nest boxes are far smaller than roosting boxes, so the body heat of the birds would be able to keep the area warmer than in a larger box. In addition, many bluebirders plug all ventilation holes in their nest boxes during the winter to minimize heat loss of birds using the boxes.

At the end of the winter, if bluebirds did use a nest box for roosting there is usually a large accumulation of droppings on the floor. For the last several years, I have collected these droppings on my first spring visit to boxes to clean them out for the nesting season. I have taken these droppings and commonly used for rearing garden plants from seeds for transplanting.

The plants that germinate are plants that the bluebirds had chosen for winter foods. I have wanted to identify these winter foods so that I could plant or encourage those same plants on my own property to support over-wintering bluebirds.

What I have found is that the vast majority (probably 95 percent) of the germinating plants from the bluebird droppings are staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*). These seeds can often be identified by the remaining red fuzzy material on them from the sumac seed heads.

A second plant that has germinated in much smaller quantity has been poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*). I have not identified any other germinating plant but often have noted among the droppings the seeds of nannyberry (*Viburnum lentago*). These seeds are easy to identify due to their large size and distinctive round and flat shape.

(Having eaten many nannyberries in the field, I am familiar with these seeds, similar to watermelon seeds but round. During my attempts to germinate seeds from bluebird droppings, I never observed any nannyberry seeds germinating in my seed pots. I have since learned that nannyberries need a period of cold (which they get in the nest box), then a period when some roots start to develop, followed by another cold period before they start above-ground growth. Some other seed types may undergo a similar process and thus would not have germinated in my tests.) Once the sumac seedlings have developed in my seed pots, I have transplanted them into my yard to establish this food source for bluebirds. Sumac is often viewed as a "weed" and cut down. I view this plant as a valuable native shrub with spectacular red fall foliage and striking red seed heads that stand out vividly against the cover of the winter snows.

Many species such as American Robins, Gray Catbirds, Ruffed Grouse, and Wild Turkeys, will consume its fruit. Sumac is a good winter food because the seeds are very persistent and are available even late in the winter unless other birds have already eaten them.

I have learned that I need to put cages around the developing sumac shrubs because the very succulent and soft new growth of young sumac is heavily used by deer. The protected plants have been very successful at establishing themselves.

I also attempted a more natural establishment procedure for growing sumac. I tilled a long strip in my yard and directly seeded the droppings into the ground. When I did this, the grasses and wildflowers quickly reinvaded and I never detected a single fruited plant developing from these sites. I would encourage others to collect, not discard, droppings found in your nest boxes after the winter. Once you determine the plants that bluebirds are surviving on during the winter, you too can encourage those plants within your own yard. This will help you to support bluebird winter survival and increase spring vigor while attracting bluebirds to your neighbourhood for observation.

(Kevin Berner is Associate Professor in the Fisheries and Wildlife Department at the State University of New York, Cobleskill, and former chair of the NABS Research Committee. He can be reached by email at BERNERKL@Cobleskill.edu, or by postal mail at Fisheries and Wildlife Department, SUNY, Cobleskill, NY 12043.)