



Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

2019 Fall Newsletter ~ Editor Bill Read

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The AGM is set for Saturday March 21, 2020 at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington. The morning session will deal with a discussion of our revised constitution followed by short talks on bluebird nest box management. Our keynote speaker for the afternoon is Todd Morris from Fisheries and Oceans Canada who will give a talk on freshwater mus-sels. One other short talk and the bucket raffle to follow.

We experienced a cold wet spring in 2019 which delayed bluebird nesting activity by 1-2 weeks. This delay was also true of other species of both plant and animal. In Southern Ontario bluebirds typically start building nests in mid to late April. A colder April at 1° C below average and with most of the precipitation falling in the second half of the month delayed this nesting activity. May was also colder at 0.7°C below average with most of the below average weather occurring in the first half of the month. This caused some bluebird nestling mortality as adult bluebirds had difficulty finding enough insects to feed their young. June at 0.04°C above the average marks the first month in 2019 that was not at least a little bit below average. Tree Swallows did well on most trails except those that were located in less than ideal locations. Nest boxes located near water sources did well as the adult Tree Swallows were able to glean insect hatches from the waters surface.

There was a marked difference in the number of House Wrens in 2019. Whereas 2018 could be called the year of the House Wren 2019 saw those numbers greatly diminished. Many trail operators remarked on the lack of wrens in 2019. Why this was is not clear. Possibly the cold wet spring had something to do with it. This was not true on all trails. **Dan Welsh** who manages nest boxes north of Hamilton experienced wren problems from the start of nesting.

Henry Miller our 2011 Conservation award winner from Rainy River (north west of Thunder Bay) stated that after a cool wet start to June some bluebirds started arriving but did not start nesting until the 16th of June. He also said that April and May were not much warmer than March. Although bluebirds nested about three weeks later than usual the 16 pairs of bluebirds on his trail of 81 nest boxes fledged 79 nestlings. He also said the Tree Swallow numbers have finally increased. The 32 pairs in his boxes fledged 151 young. Good news indeed.

Long term weather averages based on the 1981-2010 data for the Waterloo Wellington airport.

Overall it was a successful season for bluebirds and Tree Swallows on most nest box trails.

Baillie Birdathon

Sylvia van Walsum raised exactly **\$1000** in the 2019 birdathon (25% or \$250 will be given back to OEBS). Thanks for the great work over all the years you have represented us. Next year Sylvia will be doing birdathon for the Halton Bluebird Club but in 2021 she will again hopefully represent us. If anyone is interested in doing birdathon for OEBS in 2020 let me know and I can explain how to go about it.



Article below from the 2002 Fall-Winter Bluebird Newsletter

Tree Swallows Raising Bluebirds and Cowbirds

In 2002 I had a Tree Swallow with 5 Tree Swallow young and 1 Eastern Bluebird young. This has never happened before on my bluebird trail. On my first visit to the nest box I



Tree Swallow foster nest with 2 bluebirds.

recorded an Eastern Bluebird nest but no eggs. When I returned about one month later there were 5 Tree Swallow young and 1 bluebird young. All were very healthy. The bluebird pair had moved to another box, but must have laid at least 1 egg before the Tree Swallows took over. When the young bluebird was 14 days old I removed it and took it to a local rehabilitator for later release. At that time only 4 Tree Swallows were still alive (all 4 fledged), and I suspect the young bluebird was taking more than its fair share of food (it was very healthy). Adult bluebirds feed their young for 2-3 weeks after fledging. With Tree Swallows the young are only fed for 1-2 days after fledging as they fly extremely well after fledging. The other problem was that this young would not identify itself as a bluebird. She did incredibly well at the rehabilitators, but unfortunately a window was left open while they were left in a room to fly around and she flew out and never was located. At this point she was only 22-23 days old. Tree Swallows make excellent foster parents as they feed entirely protein rich insects to their young. The need to place orphaned young usually occurs in May when Tree Swallows are still incubating eggs. I have never tried this but in some cases it might work if they were the same size as the Tree Swallow young and there were only a few Tree Swallows.

One Tree Swallow nest was also parasitized by cowbirds. When I checked this nest there was 1 Cowbird egg and 3 Tree Swallow eggs. All hatched and fledged. The cowbird hatched first and left the nest after about 12 days. The Tree Swallows fledged around 20 days. Tree Swallows do not make good hosts for cowbirds as they would not feed the cowbird after it fledged.

Editors Comments

Over the years I have had at least 35 bluebird nests with cowbird eggs. In most cases I removed them. The female cowbirds usually removed one or more of the bluebird eggs before laying their own. The Eastern Bluebird is one of the most highly parasitized cavity nesters.

In 2010 I had 13 **orphaned bluebird nestlings** that needed to be put in other nests. I was able to foster them out in Tree Swallow nests until I could find bluebird nests to put

them in. I made sure that there were no more than 6 total in any nest and both the Tree Swallows and bluebirds had to be the same size so they could raise their heads to the same height when being fed. I was eventually able to put the bluebirds in other nests. All Tree Swallows and bluebirds in these nests eventually fledged. The picture adjacent shows 2 bluebirds (one behind the other) and 4 Tree Swallows. All were very healthy. Tree Swallows are amazing parents. If the weather is warm they have no problem feeding large broods with protein rich insects. Glenn Barrett who works with Environment Canada recorded two Tree Swallow nests in Thunder Bay during a contaminant study with 11 and 13 young in 2017 and 2018. All fledged successfully.

In 2008 I recorded a nest of 5 bluebirds eggs where the female disappeared after laying the eggs. A Tree Swallow pair claimed the nest box and the female Tree Swallow laid one egg and then began to incubate. All the eggs hatched except one bluebird egg that was infertile. After 4-5 days it became evident that the Tree Swallow nestling was being out competed for food. What to do. It turned out that Don Wills had a bluebird nest with 5 infertile eggs. I removed the 4 bluebird young and put them in the nest with the infertile eggs. The infertile eggs were removed and broken open and several bits of egg shell were put in the nest. The idea being that the young had hatched and the shells needed to be removed as a stimulus to the adults to start feeding. The adults did not miss a beat and began feeding their new brood almost immediately. All four fledged successfully. The most unusual part of this was the female Tree Swallow only laying 1 egg. Did she recognize the bluebird eggs as her own. I would have assumed that she would lay a full clutch of her own eggs despite the presence of the 5 bluebird eggs.



Male bluebird in Barbara Canney's backyard feeding four female fledglings.

First Brood young feeding second brood nestlings.

Last year Renée Hallman recorded a female from a first nest feeding a second brood nestling. Barbara Canney also recorded a female nestling feeding a second brood nestling in 2018 and 2019. A plentiful food supply and being female



Barbara Canney

Female bluebird at birdbath

may have had something to do with this very rarely seen behaviour. In Renée's observation the female doing the feeding was the only young that survived from the first nesting. With Barbara's bluebirds 4 young survived the first nesting (all females) and on the second nesting the young were fed mealworms on a regular basis.

Nest Box reports

Enclosed is the reporting form for 2019. **Next year we will be asking members that have nest data to report to download a reporting form from the website.** This form is located in the nest box section of our website. If you have an old form the date can be changed and submitted.

The following article from the 2013 Spring Newsletter *Eastern Bluebird Recovered in Wood fireplace*

A home owner near St. George, Ontario reported to me that he had found a dead banded Eastern Bluebird in his fireplace on December 22, 2012. This ASY (after second year) male had nested successfully in his yard in 2012 but was prevented from a second nesting by a male House Sparrow that took possession of the box while the bluebirds were feeding their fledged young. The home owner was able to get two other House Sparrows but try as he would was not able to get this one. The bluebird probably investigated the chimney as a possible nest cavity and became trapped and could not get out. The story doesn't end there. I trapped this previously banded bluebird on May 16, 2011 as a SY (second year) male a short distance further west in box PT-1. It fledged 4 young on the first nesting. I did not catch it on the second nesting which fledged 1 young. There was interference by a male House Sparrow that I was able to trap and dispose of. I did retrap the female Eastern Bluebird which was the same female as the first nesting. This now ASY male had been banded as

a nestling (1451-25571) by Brian Wyatt in Guelph in 2010 at the Guelph turf grass institute. Brian manages two trails in Guelph, the other at the Guelph Arboretum. I would suggest pairing boxes in this case and allowing the House Sparrows to nest then removing them. Once they know you are after them they become very difficult to catch. Having extra boxes that the House Sparrows can go to will help. **House Sparrows should never be allowed to nest on your trail and I recommend humanely disposing of them.** Another home owner close by having seen the success I was having put up about 20 boxes on his property to attract bluebirds. This resulted in boxes filled with House Sparrows that have now spread out to become a problem for me and the first mentioned homeowner.

Since bluebirds will investigate chimney openings. It is a good idea to put a screen over the chimney opening. Bluebirds will investigate any potential opening including **Tubex Tree Shelters.**

Tobacco barn smokestacks in the southern United States were responsible for the death of thousands of bluebirds in the late 1940's and early 1950's when they were first introduced until the problem was corrected. JR Finch estimated that during the seven years following their introduction in 1947 approximately 2 million bluebirds died in these smokestacks. Most of these fatalities occurred when the burners were not in use. This was based on responses to a questionnaire that Finch sent out to the users of the tobacco curing burners. After 1955 fewer bluebirds were recovered as the numbers had diminished in the areas where the curing barns were located. Finch theorized, probably correctly, that not only local bluebirds **but many that had migrated from further north had died as well.** (the above information is included in *The Bluebird* by Lawrence Zeleny - Indiana Uni-



Winter bluebird



Renée Hallman

Second year female Eastern Bluebird. This is a one year old female. Very pronounced white eye ring and retained juvenile feathers in the coverts.

versity Press 1978 Page 39-40. Lawrence Zeleny is the founder of the North American Bluebird Society.

Several years ago while monitoring a bluebird nest in one of the orchards the male bluebird suddenly disappeared. I didn't think to much about it at the time as mortality is part of an ongoing process with any animal. The following year while talking to the homeowner who lives close to this nest box mentioned that he had found a dead male bluebird in his fireplace that had come down the chimney. It was banded but he placed the band somewhere in his house and was not able to find it. The male bluebird that disappeared was also banded and most likely was the same bird.

Uncapped PVC mining claim pipes in the South Western United States have killed millions of cavity nesting birds. Ash throated Flycatchers and Mountain Bluebirds were the species most affected. One mining claim pipe contained 7 feet of compacted bird carcasses. Audubon Kern River Pre-



A female bluebird incubating eggs in a nestbox.

serve and Southern Sierra Research Station staff collected 231 skulls from one pipe alone. Any vent pipe over 1 inch in diameter can be a potential hazard. (This story is in the OEBS Fall 2015 Bluebird newsletter.)

A similar problem occurred with the use of vault toilets on U S forest service lands which included all the national parks in the United States. Saw Whet Owls, Boreal Owls and Screech Owls were the species most at risk. They were investigating these opening for potential nest cavities or for roosting and ended up sliding down the smooth PVC pipe and into the sewage holding tank at the bottom. Wildlife officials were alerted to this problem after someone looking into a toilet noticed a Saw Whet Owl floating in this mess. A program to put covers over every one of the toilets is now underway. This program called the Port-O-Potty Owl Project can be viewed on the internet.

Most birds that enter these openings are not noticed as they disappear so it makes it difficult to know how serious the problem is. Make sure any opening that can allow birds to enter has a protective guard over it.

Nest Box Covers

The last few years Deer Mice have been a significant problem on nest box trails. The boxes provide an ideal place for them to overwinter in and raise their young out of the rain, snow and cold. They urinate in the box causing it to have a rancid smell and the moisture causes the wood to rot quicker. They will disrupt bluebird and Tree Swallows attempting to nest and have been know to eat newly hatched Tree Swallow young. I am now placing wood covers over the entrance hole to prevent them from occupying the boxes over the winter. The box below in the Orchard Home apple orchard is also numbered for easier record keeping. You can remove them in the spring but by then they have already ruined the box and are more apt to return after being removed. If they are not allowed to use the box over the winter the chance of them returning is greatly reduced. They are a host for the lyme disease vector and have been documented transmitting hannavirus. The bluebird society recommends using a face mask when removing Deer Mouse nests.

