

Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

2011 Fall Newsletter Editor Bill Read info@billreadsbooks.com

The AGM is set for Saturday, March 17th, 2012 at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Ontario. Our feature speaker is **Lyle Friesen** who will discuss his work on **Wood Thrush** in fragmented woodlots.

This past spring saw Eastern Bluebirds in somewhat lower numbers. Overall the nesting season was average to below average based on the nest box reports I have received so far. Most had fewer bluebirds with lower reproductive success per pair. Harsh winter weather in Eastern North America may have resulted in higher than normal mortality among bluebirds that overwintered in those areas.

The weather was certainly a factor this year but not the usual cold we get in May. March 2011 was 1.3 degrees colder than average and the wettest in almost 35 years. The 136.6 mm of total precipitation was almost twice the average of 70.6 mm and the wettest March since 1976.

The wet weather continued with the wettest April since records began in the area in 1914 with 136.5 mm coming down. This just barely beat the 1921 record of 135.9 mm. March and April can be difficult for returning and overwintering bluebirds as most of the previous years berries are gone and they must rely on insects. The wet weather makes it difficult to find these..

Overall the temperature in April was 0.1 degree above average.

The above average amounts of rainfall in March and April delayed first nesting attempts by as much as three weeks. This also resulted in fewer Eastern Bluebird second nestings.

May was slightly warmer than average but it was still the fifth wettest May on record and the wettest ever start to the year.

Just like April the first half of the month was very dry and it was the second half that put us well above average. This continuing wet weather resulted in somewhat lower nest success on first broods.

Weather is the number one factor affecting bluebird success or failure.

Weather data is from the **The University of Waterloo Weather Station**. It is supported by the department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, the Department of Geography, the Climate Research Branch of Environment Canada, and Campbell Scientific Canada



Picture by Georg Hentsch

This is a picture of 4 nestling Tree Swallows and 2 Eastern Bluebirds. All 4 Tree Swallows can be seen but only 1 bluebird as the other is not visible behind the front bluebird. The one that is visible is a male. I sometimes use Tree Swallows as foster parents for orphaned bluebird young as long as there are no more than 4 Tree Swallow young and with the addition of the bluebirds it does not total more than 6. **All must be the same size.** The above nestlings are very healthy. The above bluebirds were put in a nest box with other nestling bluebirds before fledging. Tree Swallows do not feed their young once they fledge whereas bluebird young are completely dependent on the adults for at least 3 weeks. All the Tree Swallows in this box fledged successfully. Tree Swallows do not remove the fecal sacs the last few days before fledging. Finding a TRES nest caked in fecal matter is a good sign as it means the Tree Swallows did not fledge prematurely. They must be able to fly well in order to catch insects once they fledge.



Picture by Georg Hentsch

This picture shows both young bluebirds. Notice the more prominent eye ring on the bird on the right.

Are House Finches driving down House Sparrow populations?

It seems that the bane of bluebirders, the introduced House Sparrow, is declining in North America. This species was introduced to New York City from Europe in 1853 and wasted no time in dispersing-in about 50 years this aggressive and adaptable species had spread across the continent. The house Finch, normally a western species, was introduced into New York City in 1943, and promptly spread throughout the east. While the House finch population was growing in the east, the House Sparrow population was declining. Coincidence? Or do House finches enjoy a competitive advantage over House Sparrows?

Analysis of these species` populations in the northeast seems to show that, even though House Sparrow populations had already started declining when the House finch arrived on the scene, the presence of the House finch accelerated the House Sparrows decline. Score one for the House Finch.

But in the Southeast, even though House Sparrows are declining, there does not appear to be a link with House Finches. If the finches were out competing the sparrows for, say, food or habitat, we would expect to find areas where house Finches had driven out all the House Sparrows. But this study could find no sparrow free zones with House Finches. The authors concluded that, although House Sparrows are declining in the Southeast, it's not because of competition with House finches.-the real reason remains elusive.

Christopher J.W. McClure, Laura K. Estep, and Geoffrey E. Hill. 2011. A multi-scale analysis of Competition Between the House Finch and House Sparrow in the Southeastern United States. **Condor 113:462-468**

Editors Note - House Sparrows have long been the bane of bluebirders. They kill Tree Swallows and bluebirds that get caught in the same nest box with the House Sparrow. The male House Sparrow whacks them – Tony Soprano like with his weaver finch bill until there are no feathers left on the victims head and they are dead. The male also does the same to nestling Tree Swallows and will also prevent the adults from feeding them. **House Sparrows must never be allowed to nest on your trail. If you cannot bring yourself to remove them then take your boxes down as you are not helping the bluebird or Tree Swallow population.**

Both the recent **Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (2001-2005)** and **Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)** show continued declines for the House Sparrow in Ontario. BBS data have shown significant declines for the House Sparrow in both Ontario and Canada since surveys began in 1968. A similar trend is evident in CBC data. This decline was most significant in the Lake Simcoe-Rideau and Southern Shield regions of the province. (Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas 2001-2005) This is probably welcome news for nest box trail operators.

Several reasons for this decline have been noted.

1. Increasing numbers of predators such as Sharp-Shinned Hawk and Merlin in urban areas. The Merlin has increased significantly in Ontario and New York and its major prey item in urban environments is the House Sparrow.
2. Are blue birders contributing to this decline as most remove and humanely dispose of all House Sparrows on their bluebird trails?
3. Changes in agricultural practices may also be a contributing factor. Kevin J. McGowan in the Second Breeding Bird Atlas of New York sites changing

agricultural practices with increased use of pesticides that reduce insect food, and increased efficiency that reduces spillage and weed seeds.

4.Changes in weather patterns caused by apparent global warming may have some impact although House Sparrows are not migratory.

It is interesting to note that in Ontario the House finch has increased from the first to second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas.

House Sparrows are still fairly common in Ontario and based on point counts from the last Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (published in 2007) are estimated at 2,000,000 individuals. They are distributed as follows, Carolinian area-1.2 million, Lake Simcoe-Rideau area - 900, 000, Southern Shield area-15,000, Northern shield area-30,000.

In the Carolinian and Lake Simcoe-Rideau areas where most nest box trails are located the Eastern Bluebird population is estimated to be 7,000 and 20,000 respectively. The Southern shield area has 5,000 and the northern shield area is estimated at 12,000. The total Ontario population of EABL is pegged at 40,000.

Historical Perspective on changing House Sparrow populations

In my opinion Agricultural practices have played more of a roll in the decline of the House sparrow in North America. Most accounts indicate that House Sparrows reached their population peak between 1900-1910, and have steadily declined since then. The introduction of the House Sparrow created problems for bluebirds nesting in settled areas. Although at this time most Eastern Bluebirds had been driven from the towns and cities by the House Sparrow they were still common to abundant in the outlying areas where they nested in cavities in old apple trees and in fence posts and natural cavities. Changes in agricultural practices after 1910 affected the bluebird as much or more than the House Sparrow.

Feeding Meal worms The picture below was taken by the late John Millman on Don Wills farm near Carluke. John was a director at large for OEBS and we all miss him greatly. I believe this pair had 2 successful nestings. It takes young bluebirds about 3 weeks to develop their foraging skills. During this time the male stays with them while the female is

incubating a new set of eggs. Even though the young could feed themselves from the dish they still wait to be fed by the adults. You can pick out the young females from the young males by the amount of colour on their outer wing and tail feathers. The EABL in the air above the male is the adult female. If bluebirds are nesting nearby or in your yard it is fairly easy to get them to come to a meal worm feeder. Not so easy in the winter. Mealworms can be purchased by OEBS members at \$35 plus shipping for 10,000. See the home page of our website for the address and phone number of our meal worm supplier. This is 1/20 the cost of buying them from a pet store. They will be mailed to you by Canada post. It's already time to start thinking about next year.



Breakfast at Don Wills Farm

Reports from the Field 2011

Don Wills had another successful year with 482 fledged young bluebirds from 100 pairs. (4.82 young per pair) This is down somewhat from last

years total of 531. Don reported very little Eastern Bluebird nestling mortality but re-nests (second broods) were only about 35-40% where in good years they are 60-70%.

Don commented that Tree Swallows on his trail of over 400 boxes had a record year with between 1200-1500 fledged young. This was the case on most trails, high numbers of Tree Swallows but lower numbers of bluebirds. Don also had about 25 pairs of House Wrens.

Adriano Borean of Hamilton had 31 bluebirds fledge from his nest box trail in the Binbrook area. This is down from 2009 when he had 49 fledge but higher than last year,s total of 26. He also had 145 Tree Swallows fledge and 6 nests of House Wrens. Adriano may try groups of 3 boxes in some areas next year.

Joe Kral Reports –This years birding season brought me both happiness and disappointment. Happiness because 2051 young birds fledged (**Tree Swallow- 1778, House Wren-107, Eastern Bluebird- 92, Black –Capped Chickadee-74,**) from my bird houses and disappointment because 20 young bluebirds fledged less than last year. The nestling bluebirds main diet are grasshoppers, about 40% and it was difficult to find any till the end of July. This is why most bluebirds nested only once this season. Joe only had 3 second nestings of EABL (pairs that already nested successfully once) During my regular checks I found that a lot of the young bluebirds were in fact starving. In two birdhouses I found dead males lying beside their young. Four EABL nestings were unsuccessful.

Herb Furniss and Don Parkes report the following. April and May were cool and wet. Without food the Eastern Bluebirds didn,t nest. As a result they were at least three weeks late starting. However they made up for it with many second nestings resulting in 135 fledglings in 2011. This is about average and we are vey pleased with these results. This is our 26th season on the Carden Alvar. To date we have fledged 2905 Eastern Bluebirds. As always we look forward to next year. **Herb and Don were awarded the 2003 Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society Conservation award.**

Don Bissonnette of the Essex County Field Naturalists Bluebird Committee reports 21 pair of bluebirds fledged 101 young in 2011. This is down considerably from the 209 total of 24 pair and 154 fledged. The Essex group were awarded the 2010 OEBS Conservation Award.

Delores Hamilton had a very successful year with 23 young EABL fledged from 3 pairs and 6 successful nestings. Two eggs failed to hatch and two young died in the nest. Her trail of 11 boxes is located in Wellington County. She also had 24 Tree Swallows fledge along with one nest of House Wren.

Gerrard Powers of Owen Sound had one of his best years with 259 young EABL fledged. His nest box trail of 201 boxes is located in Grey County. Gerrard had 38 pairs or 6.8 fledged young per pair. He also had 545 Tree Swallow fledge from his boxes.

Your newsletter editor **Bill Read** fledged 212 young from 45 pairs or 4.7 young per pair. (this is down from 316 in 2008, 238 in 2009 and 269 in 2010) A total of 335 bluebird eggs were laid in 2011 (63.3 % of eggs laid resulted in fledged bluebirds.) A total of 18 young died and were removed by the adults or by myself. Fourteen nest failures were recorded (eggs were laid but no bluebirds fledged). Fledged young per pair and percentage of eggs laid that resulted in fledged bluebirds was considerably down from previous years and I believe the wet weather was a factor.

The following article and Editors Note was included in the 1991 Fall OEBS newsletter

On the evening of July 11, 1991, David and Nancy Sternthall brought a young male Eastern bluebird to my home in Kitchener. The young bird was a nestling that did not fledge with the others in its brood and was removed by a friend of theirs, John Jefferson, only after waiting almost half a day to see if the adults would return. This sometimes happens in a large clutch where the last hatched is not quite ready to fledge with the others. It was quite healthy at about 22 days of age and was constantly making bluebird food calls so the adult bluebirds could locate it. David and Nancy had been feeding it insects during the time they had been keeping it but were quite anxious to see it released so it could carry on a normal bluebird life. Young bluebirds are completely dependent on the adults for two to three weeks after fledging and would quickly starve to death if left on their own at this age.

The problem was how and where to release it. They brought with them a supply of grasshoppers which we put in my refrigerator to slow down their metabolism. This made it a lot easier at feeding time (every 20 minutes)

Since it was later in the nesting season I did not have a lot of bluebirds still nesting. I thought for a while and then remembered that a pair of Eastern Bluebirds had just fledged young at the back of the Fisher apple orchard near Copetown three days before. They would still be close by. Young birds that fledge fly to the highest part of a nearby tree and stay there for some time while the adults feed them. I drove to the Fisher apple orchard the next day with Ben (nick- named by David and Nancy) in a small box with perch and hardware cloth over it secured with clothes pegs. As soon as I arrived adult bluebirds began making distress calls which indicated their fledged young were still in the trees behind me. I put the box down below the trees and hid in my car about 100 feet away to see what would happen. As soon as Ben began making his begging calls the adults flew down beside the box. I knew then I could release him successfully to his soon to be foster parents. I ran back to the box and opened the screen from behind so Ben wouldn't see me, and then went back to hide in the car and observe. No sooner had I left than both adults came back down and perched nearby. A gust of wind came up and blew the box slightly upon which Ben took off and flew to almost the top of one of the large trees. Both adult bluebirds followed him and perched nearby. Now all Ben has to do is continue his begging food calls. Ben was banded male hatch year 2021-79181.

Editors Note

It is illegal to keep any native passerine for an extended period of time without a special permit from the ministry of natural resources. Very specialized care is needed to raise Eastern Bluebird young successfully and it is best to let adult bluebirds do that if at all possible. There are however some cases where intervention will save young from sure death. If a situation arises give me a call and I can suggest what the best course of action would be. Bill Read

Just such a situation came up in 2010. A female Eastern Bluebird laid 5 eggs in a nest after which the bluebirds disappeared. I don't like to use the word abandoned because this implies that they decided one day to just get up and leave. In most cases something happens to one of the adults. A pair of Tree Swallows took over the box and laid 1 egg. The female Tree Swallow laying only 1 egg is quite unusual. The female then started incubating. About 14 days later 4 bluebirds and 1 Tree Swallow hatched. One bluebird egg was infertile. Tree Swallows make excellent foster parents as they feed only insects. After 3-4 days it became evident that the smaller Tree Swallow was being out competed for food and would not survive if left in this

situation. When Tree Swallows fledge they are on their own to find food, the adults no longer feed them. Bluebird young fly to the top of a nearby tree and wait for the adults to bring them food. Letting them fledge from this box would have meant certain death.

A friend of mine Don Wills had a pair of bluebirds that laid 2 sets of infertile eggs so I decided to move the bluebird young to this box. We removed the eggs, broke some and put the egg shells back in the nest with the 4 young bluebirds. The adults began feeding them almost immediately and they later fledged. The Tree Swallow also successfully fledged.

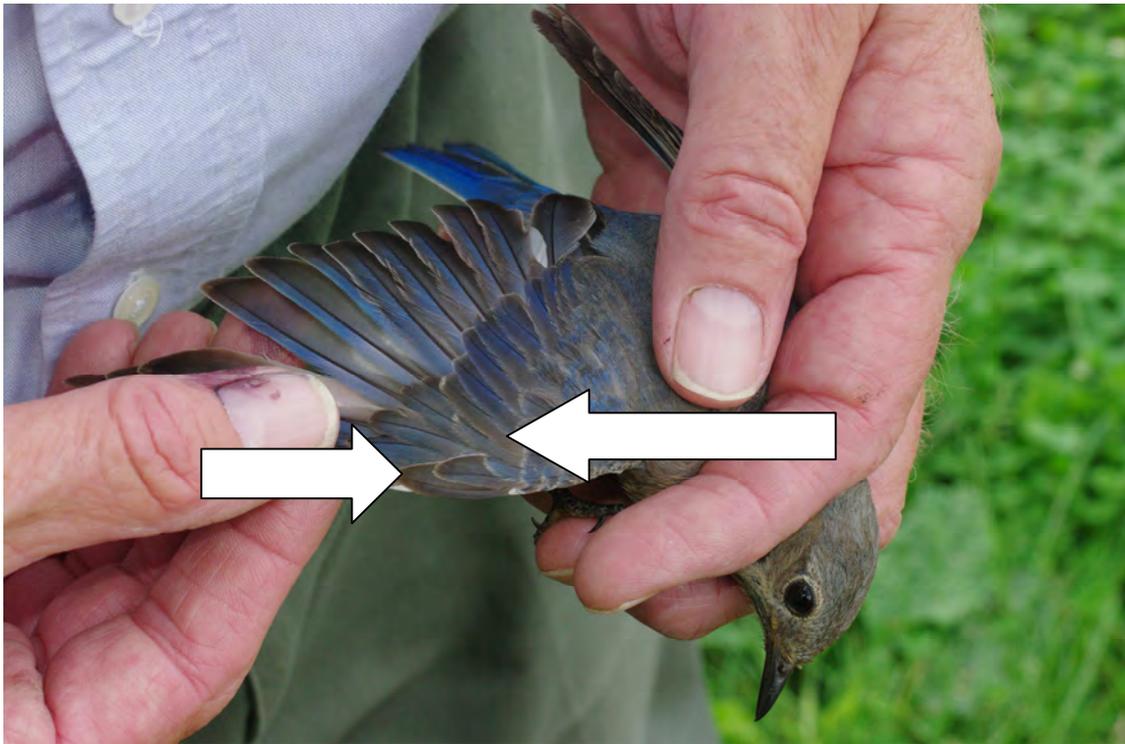
Manipulation of Tree Swallow Eggs

It has come to our attention that some members are removing or moving Tree Swallow eggs to accommodate more Bluebirds. The Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society will not endorse these actions. It is important to remember that Eastern Bluebirds and other native birds that use nest boxes are wild birds. Their use of nest boxes does not entitle the nest box owner to interfere in any way with nesting activities. All native birds including Tree Swallows and House Wrens that use nest boxes are protected under the Migratory Birds Convention Act. House Sparrows are not a native bird and they and their nests can be removed in a humane manner. To accommodate Tree Swallows put up another box about 8 feet away which leaves one box open for bluebirds. All boxes must be mounted on free standing metal poles with some form of predator protection to stop climbing predators. The Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society will not endorse boxes that do not have this protection.

Banding of Eastern Bluebirds

In the last newsletter I wrote an article about my banding project in Apple Orchards. (Spring-2011) All breeding Eastern Bluebirds have a complete moult after they have finished nesting. This occurs from Jul-Oct. They replace all their feathers during this time. When you see them in late fall and early winter they look brilliant in their fresh plumage. They will not moult again until after breeding the next year. All hatch year (HY) birds will have a partial to incomplete moult during this July-Oct period. Since they retain some juvenal plumage into next years breeding season they can be aged to

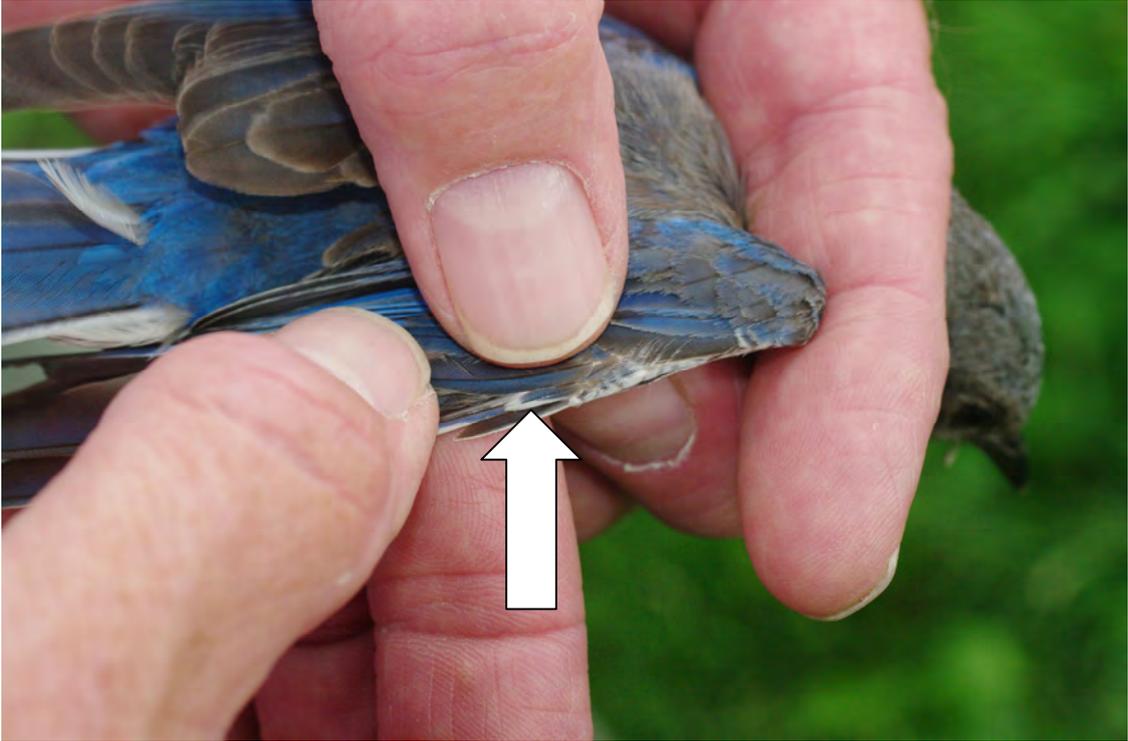
either second year (SY) or after second year (ASY). A SY bird is approximately one calendar year old. An ASY bird will be at least two years old or more. By banding them I can tell their age in calendar years when I re-trap them as ASY birds. The following pictures show how to age the adult Eastern Bluebirds by looking at their plumage.



Picture by Georg Hentsch

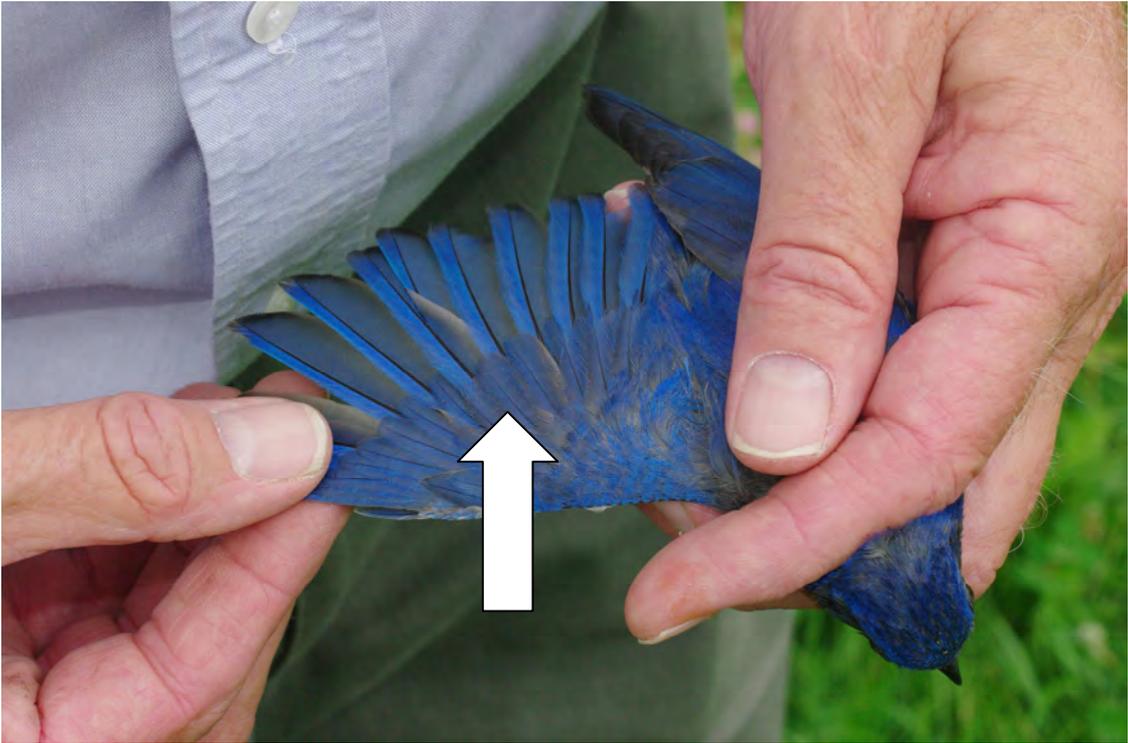
Banding of Eastern bluebird

The EABL that I am holding above is a second year (SY) female. She still retains juvenile plumage. The right side arrow points to a retained juvenal greater covert. This brownish blue retained greater covert contrasts with the fresher and bright bluish appearance of the replaced greater coverts above it. This is referred to as a moult limit. The other greater coverts in this same row above the arrow have been replaced during the partial moult in Jul-Oct of the previous year. The left side arrow points to a retained juvenal alula feather. There are two alula feathers. Notice the fresher and brighter bluish appearance of the replaced alula covert (a very small feather at the base of the two alula feathers) below the tip of the right side arrow.



Picture by Georg Hentsch

This is the same female as above. The arrow is pointing to the outermost (reduced) primary covert. The appearance of this feather can be used in conjunction with other features in aging adult bluebirds. It should not be relied on exclusively in aging. In second year birds it appears more rounded without as much blue and with much broader buffy (white) fringes.



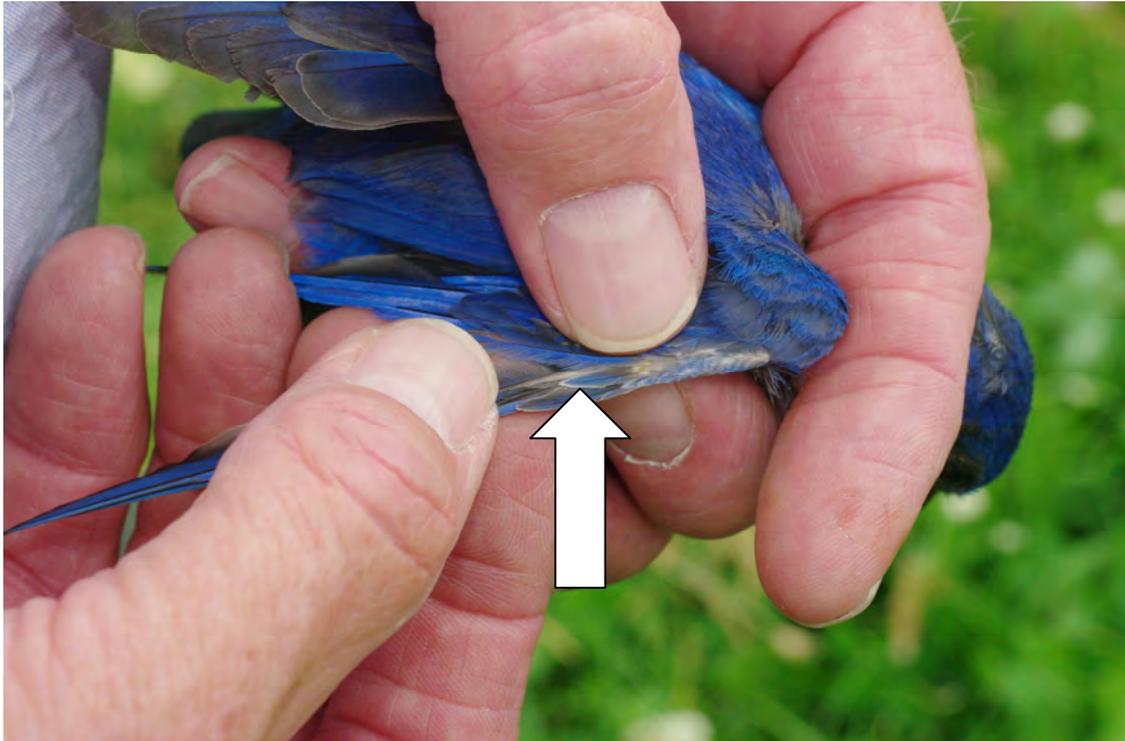
Picture by Georg Hentsch

The above picture is of an after second year male (ASY) Very bright blue with no contrast between the primary and greater coverts. A beautiful blue that seems to get richer the older the bird. This male was at least 5 years old. He has gone through at least four complete moults. All breeding adults go through a complete moult at the end of the nesting season.



Picture by Georg Hentsch

This male was banded as an **AHY male 1431-59388** on **June 18th, 2006** at box 35 at the back of the Orchard Home Orchard located near St George ON. It was probably a SY bird but could have been ASY. For some reason I did not age it to SY or ASY at that time. For a description of this bird's reproductive success see the **2011 spring newsletter page 4**. Past newsletters can be accessed on our website www.oeps.ca. It has nested at Orchard home 5 consecutive years and was last re-trapped on June 22, 2010. It did not return to nest in Orchard Home in 2011. It has been re-trapped 8 times and over the 5 years fledged at least **33 young and probably as many as 44**.



Picture by Georg Hentsch

The above picture is the same male as above. The arrow is pointing to the outermost (reduced) primary covert. This feather shows more blue than the female above and is very pointed, narrow and with very little buffy (white) fringes.

2011 Nest box Survey Form

This form can also be downloaded from our website. Please send your survey in and I will include it in the 2012 Spring Newsletter.

Ontario 2011 Eastern Bluebird Nest Box Survey

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postal Code: _____ Telephone: () _____

Email: _____

County where bluebird boxes are located: _____

If more than one county, number in each; _____

How many bluebird boxes did you monitor? _____ Total number of boxes on your trail? _____

How many times did you check your trail during the nesting season? _____

Number of boxes used successfully¹ by Eastern Bluebirds? _____

Number² of successful Eastern Bluebird nestings (broods) _____

Number of young EABL's fledged³: _____ Unsuccessful Eastern Bluebird nestings⁴: _____

1. "Used successfully" means at least one bluebird was fledged. More than one nesting per box equals one box used successfully.
2. Include all Eastern Bluebird nestings in each box; for example, two broods raised in one box equals two successful nestings.
3. A young bird is said to be fledged when it leaves the nest box on its own power.
4. Include in this category if a nest was built and eggs were laid, but for some reason no Eastern bluebirds fledged.

Number of Eastern Bluebird eggs laid in boxes: Blue _____ White _____

Number of EABL eggs known to have hatched: _____

Number of EABL eggs which did not hatch _____

Number of eggs for which fate unknown: _____

Description of Box

Top opening: _____ Side opening: _____ Front opening: _____

Depth from bottom of hole to floor: _____ Inside dimensions _____

Wood type and thickness: _____ Colour of box: _____

What sort of predator protection was used, if any? _____

Record the number of pairs of EABL's on your trail on the middle of the next page.

Successful Nestings of Other Species:

House Wren: _____ Tree Swallow: _____ Tree Swallow Unsuccessful Nestings : _____

Black Capped Chickadee: _____ House Sparrow: _____

Banding Totals

Eastern Bluebird: _____ Tree Swallow: _____

Name of Bander: _____

Number of years you have maintained a nest box trail: _____

What methods were used to discourage House Sparrows: _____

Date of first Eastern Bluebird sighting in 2008 _____ Number of EABL's seen: _____ Date of last Eastern Bluebird sighting in 2008 _____ Number of EABL's seen: _____

Number of pairs of EABL's represented by your nest box trail: _____

Has the population of EABL's in your area decreased over the past 5 years? _____

Number of pairs of Eastern Bluebirds in your area nesting in natural cavities: _____

Where are your boxes located? Please circle.

Pastureland

Open Field

Cereal Crops
(corn, barley, oats, wheat, etc.)

Hedgerow

Woodland Edge

Railway Tracks

Lawn

Cemetery
(any mowed area, park, golf course)

Roadside

Orchard

Garden

If eggs or nestings were lost, indicate the importance of the **presumed cause** (Number "1" for the most important to "9" for the least important).

Pesticides/
herbicides _____ Humans _____ Raccoons _____ House Wrens _____

House Sparrows _____ Squirrels _____ Snakes _____ Blowflies _____

Weather: _____ Other: _____

Would you be willing to share your trail and experiences with others? _____

Suggestions for changes in survey or overall comments: _____

Did you receive C.W.I.P. funding? Yes No

Mail to: Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society
c/o Bill Read, 24 Brant Pl, Cambridge, ON N1S 2V8.

Membership renewal To renew your membership you can also go to our website www.oebs.ca and print a membership renewal form or copy the one below. A tax receipt will be issued for donations of \$10 or more. Thanks again for your continued support and for the many donations we received in 2011.

Join the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

Charitable Registration No. 80896 6824 RR0001

To join the OEBS, print and then fill out the form below.
Mail it with a cheque or money order for \$10 dollars CDN individual membership or
\$15 dollars CDN family membership to:

**Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society
c/o Anne Davidson
187 Eagle St
Delhi ON N4B 1S7
Canada**

Name:

Address:

City:

Province:

Postal Code:

Telephone:

Email
Address:

Membership form for the North American Bluebird Society

A special offer by NABS allows affiliate members to join NABS at the special one year rate of \$15 in US funds. This is especially good with our dollar approaching par with the US dollar. OEBS is an affiliate of the NABS. Go to www.nabluebirdsociety.org/aplus See in red **affiliate membership special**

North American Bluebird Society

New Membership

Renewal

A Gift

Subscription from: _____

For: Name:

Address:

City:

State/Province: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email:

How did you learn about NABS membership?

(Multiple years are not available for A+ This membership type must be renewed annually.)

A+ (for affiliate members only) \$15.00 Name of affiliate organization: _____

An on-line membership form with payment through paypal is available online at **www.nabluebirdsociety.org**

* Note: Canadian members use postal or bank money order in US Funds only

