Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society
1994 Spring Newsletter

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Welcome to the Spring 1994 Newsletter. Hopefully by the time you receive your newsletter the weather will have warmed up and your spirits with it. So much for the Farmer's County Almanac, which predicted a mild winter - something about squirrels not collecting as many nuts last fall.

As Mark Twain once said, "A lot of people talk about the weather but nobody does anything about it". This has been a winter that a lot of people will be talking about for quite awhile.

The fall was colder than normal with all months except December below the normal mean (see chart). Although December 1993 was actually at the average, it was deceiving as the first three weeks were very warm followed by ten (10) bitterly cold days starting December 21.

January's mean temperature of -13.2°C was the coldest since records were kept starting in 1914.[1]

	Mean Temperature °C	
	Actual	Normal
September 1993	12.4	14.3
October 1993	6.9	8.0
November 1993	2.0	2.5
December 1993	-4.0	-4.0
January 1994	-13.2	-7.3

The previous coldest January was -12.8°C in 1977. The mean January 1994 minimum temperature of -18.2°C also broke the old record of -16.8°C in 1977. The mean January 1994 maximum temperature was the third coldest on record. Twelve records were either tied or broken for this area, -25°C on January 10 breaking the old record of -24°C in January 1942, -29°C on the 19th breaking the old record of -27°C in 1970, and -26°C on the 20th breaking the 1975 record of -24°C. The coldest day on record for this area was -32°C on the 16th of January 1984.

Depending on where you live in the province, the temperature was either slightly warmer or much, much colder further north. This cold extended well into the American Southeast with record cold temperatures in most areas. It will undoubtedly cause greater than normal mortality among over wintering EABL's in those areas. We can expect lower numbers of returning EABL's in spring 1994.

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[1] Weather data recorded at Waterloo Guelph Regional Airport Environment Canada Weather Office: Temperature norms have been adjusted slightly to take into account the 30 years of additional information.

In Peter Whelan's bird column in the Globe and Mail Focus section on Saturday, February 19th was a reference to Glen Howe of Port Stanley observing 11 EABL's roosting for the night in a nestbox on his property. I phoned Glen to confirm this and he told me he had observed activity around the box about 5 o'clock on one of the days during the extremely cold weather of January 19th (-29°C). He went out to take a closer look and counted 10 EABL's and very quickly put the lid back on. The next morning Bob Hubert, who put the box up and maintains a very successful EABL trail in the area, checked the box and found it empty. All had survived the cold of that night.

EABL's regularly over winter in the Port Stanley-St. Thomas area but this January's weather would have made it very difficult for them to have done so successfully. The temperature recorded on January 19, 1994 at the Waterloo-Wellington Environment Canada weather office about 100 kilometres northeast of Port Stanley was -29°C, the coldest for this day since records have been kept dating back to 1914. The next night also set a record at -26°C.

EABL's regularly over winter in the Port Stanley area and Bob Hubert has observed a flock of eight on most days at Hawk Cliff. Bob observed this same flock eating sumac berries at Hawk Cliff when I phoned him Friday, February 25th.

Bluebirds are much hardier than you would expect and can survive very cold temperatures if a reliable food source is available. They can also be enticed to a bird feeder if the proper fare is provided.

Birdathon 94

Rick Ryan, one half of our membership Treasurer duo, will again this year be our official Baillee Birdathon representative. You can make a pledge for the 94 Birdathon at the AGM on Saturday, March 26th. Thanks to Rick and his sponsors - $84.76 was raised for OEBS in 1993.

Archives

Ted Presant has organized the OEBS past correspondence into a logical order so that they can more easily be accessed. A big job! Thanks again, Ted!

1993 Nestbox Survey

I am still collecting nesting data from the 1993 nesting season. The names of all of the participants were listed by county on the 1992 nestbox report that was sent out in February. If you know someone with a nestbox trail whose name was not listed, please photocopy a 1993 survey form for them and send in their name to me. Make sure to record the number of breeding pairs returning to your EABL trail.

This survey can only be successful if the maximum number of trail operators report their results from year to year. It is not necessary to provide detailed information to be useful to OEBS. The number of boxes, number of returning pairs of EABL's and number of successful or unsuccessful nesting is sufficient.

Tubex Tree Shelters - Concerns

Tree shelters are plastic tubes that are placed around a seedling at the time of planting. They are designed to be left on the tree for five years. The tubes create a micro climate around the tree that traps carbon-dioxide and moisture and moderates temperature extremes. As a result they have increased seedling growth rates by seven to eight times, as well as increased seedling survival.

There has been a report of an Eastern Bluebird and House Sparrow entering a tubex and becoming trapped inside. The problem lessens as the seedling grows. Bluebirds continually examine cavities for potential nesting sites during the nesting season while on migration and on their wintering areas. This problem can be solved by placing a mesh net over the tubex, but this mesh is not currently available in Ontario.

I do not believe it to be a serious problem, but at present, have very little information since no systematic checks of the tubex tree shelters have been made. If you have an area with both EABL's and a large tree shelter plantation, would you please organize a check of the shelters for signs of cavity nesting birds and send any information to OEBS. Make sure to get permission from the property owner before the survey is conducted. The best time to check would be mid to late May before the bottoms are obscured by growing vegetation by looking in the top of each shelter. In this way we can ascertain the extent of the problem, if there is one. I have written a letter to Tubex in England to express my concerns and will reprint the reply in the Fall Newsletter with some of the observations that are sent in.

Bluebird Books Worth Reading

Does your local library have information on Bluebirds? If not, you might ask them if they could take out a membership in OEBS or order some books on Bluebirds.

The Bluebird by Lawrence Zeleny (founder NABS) $10.00 U.S. funds
North American Bluebird Society, P.O. Box 6295, Silver Spring, Maryland U.S.A. 20906-0295
Membership: $15.00 U.S. per year

Bluebird Trails - A Guide to Success by Scriven $11.50 U.S. funds
Bluebird Recovery Program c/o Marlys Hjort, 9571 - 270 Street North, Chisago City MN 55013

OEBS BOARD OF DIRECTORS

At the March 26th AGM a Board of Directors will be formed to run the OEBS. The following positions are available:

President	*Bill Read*	Secretary	
1st Vice-President		Directors at Large	
Membership Secretary/Treasurer	*Darlene and Rick Ryan*	(four needed, one of which will be in charge of County Co-ordinators	
Newsletter Editor	*Bill Read*	Nestbox Survey Annual Report	*Bill Read*

If you are interested in becoming a board member, please contact me prior to the meeting (Bill Read, 519-748-4853) or see me in the morning. We will do this before lunch. Meetings will be held in the Burlington/Kitchener area and we will meet four to five times per year. No experience necessary, just an interest in Bluebirds.

The following article, *The Effects on Bluebird Productivity of Not Monitoring Boxes* by Wayne H. Davis is reprinted from Sialia, Summer 1993, Volume 15, Number 3.

Everyone with experience on a bluebird trail recognizes the importance of monitoring boxes to maximize their efficiency for production of bluebirds. If a dead brood or abandoned nest is cleaned out, the bluebirds will likely nest again. If a House Sparrow (Passer domesticus) is destroyed and its nest removed, bluebirds are likely to move in. For both the pleasure of bluebirding and to increase the effectiveness of our work, checking each box throughout the nesting season is important.

Every summer since 1958 I have spent a week or more in northwestern Minnesota where I have access to a farm and several cemeteries. Over the years I have placed various nesting structures for Eastern Bluebirds (Sialia sialis) in these locations. These nest sites are heavily used by bluebirds and are, generally, successful; the flattened nests indicate that bluebirds have probably fledged the previous summer. Northwestern Minnesota is especially conducive to success; there are no black snakes, and I have never seen those little biting ants that are such a problem in Kentucky.

There probably are many trail operators who spend part of each summer someplace away from home and either have, or have thought about having, boxes at that location. Without being able to monitor boxes, one might wonder what the result might be. If the boxes raised House Sparrows, it would be better not to erect them, for we do not want to have an evolutionary selection for House Sparrows that prefer to nest in our boxes.

To measure the effect of infrequent visits, I have established lines of boxes along several major highways and parkways in central Kentucky and subjected them to different treatment schedules. Boxes were placed on the right-of-way fences which belong to the state highway department. The boxes have slot entrances. Most are 5 inches (12.5 cm) deep; those that have had House Sparrows in earlier years had received wooden blocks to make them more shallow ($3\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 8.7 cm). I placed the boxes on the wire fences instead of the steel T posts so that I could treat them with ant barrier (see Fig. 1).

On one line I cleaned the boxes and treated the access wires with Tangle Trap® in January 1992. Another line was treated with Tangle Trap in July 1991, and the boxes cleaned out in February 1992. A third line was treated in February 1991 and the boxes cleaned out in August 1991. The fourth line consisted of boxes that had not been tended in any way in either 1991 or 1992.

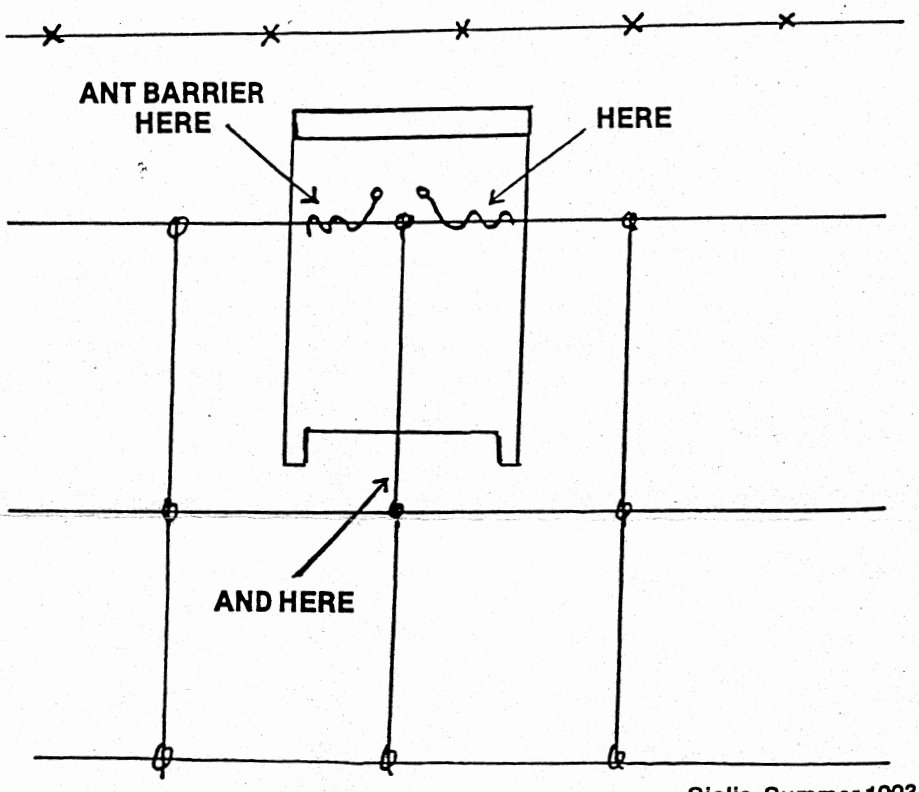
All boxes were inspected 25-27 July 1992, and their contents and condition recorded. A wide variety of situations was found. The most common findings were boxes that had fledged bluebirds and boxes that contained ants, mice, or both. Other findings included nest starts, unused nests, abandoned eggs, dead young, and active nests of bluebirds. Three boxes had wasps, one had bumblebees, and two had been raided by raccoons. Several boxes had become unsuitable for bluebirds because of encroachment of weeds or vines. In addition to bluebirds, the boxes fledged House Wrens (Troglodytes aedon), Carolina Wrens (Chryothorus ludovicichus), Tree Swallows (Tachycineta bicolor), Carolina Chickadees (Parus carolinensis), and House Sparrows. Eight of the boxes that had not been tended since 1990 contained nests that had fledged bluebirds in 1991 but not in 1992. The 1992 fledgings were easily recognized by the feces on the sides of the box and on the nest as well as the fragments of beetles and grasshoppers.

The most important findings are summarized in Table 1. The few bluebird nests that were still active have been lumped with those that had fledged.

Discussion

Tangle Trap is effective as an ant barrier throughout the season when applied in January. Ants had obtained access to a single box via an ironweed that had grown up and lodged in the entrance. Tangle Trap was not effective as a mouse barrier. Mice could reach the corners of the box and bypass the Tangle Trap. They also would go through it and wear it off, however, making a box accessible to ants. Ant barriers applied in August of 1991 were generally effective through the 1992 season if they were not worn by mice or bypassed with weeds. No trace remained of the ant barrier that had been placed in February 1991.

Figure 1. Rear View of Box Mounted on Wire Fence.



Sialia, Summer 1993

Mice generally use boxes in winter; few mouse nests appear in summer if boxes are cleaned in early spring. Thus, boxes cleaned and treated for ants in January were generally available for bluebirds. A high percentage of boxes that were not cleaned were unavailable to bluebirds.

Roughly a third of the boxes on all four lines studied fledged bluebirds in 1992. This was surprising because in some areas of Kentucky all of our boxes get filled with mouse nests in winter. The apparent explanation is that this experiment was done in what is known as the Central Bluegrass of Kentucky. Much of the roadside here is manicured on both sides of the fence, providing no cover for mice or ants. The mice that use our boxes (Peromyscus leucopus) must have some sort of cover - brush, trees, logs, rocks, etc. Since ants (Crematogaster clara) leave the boxes in autumn to spend the winter under cover in the ground, the clean fence rows are also unsuitable for these insects.House Sparrows were a minor problem. Only four boxes fledged sparrows and in a few others sparrows started nests but didn't finish them.

Table 1. Use of Boxes in 1992

	#	Fledged bluebirds in 1992	Percent that fledged bluebirds	Fledged House Sparrows	Had ants	Had mouse nests	Percent with mice and/or ants
Treated and cleaned Jan.'92	46	17	37%	3	1	4	11%
Treated in July '91; cleaned Feb. '92	44	19	43%	0	7	7	32%
Treated in Feb. '91; cleaned Aug. '91	66	22	33%	0	16	12	38% *
Not treated or cleaned '91 or '92	58	17	29%	1	17	12	43% *

* A few boxes had both mouse nests and ants.

Should you put up boxes in an area that you visit regularly but once a year? That probably depends upon the House Sparrow situation. The worst thing that could happen would be for your line of boxes to degenerate into a House Sparrow slum. There are, however, many areas with good bluebird habitat and no House Sparrows. There are no sparrows on the mines in eastern Kentucky where we have done experiments with bluebirds and European Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris). In northwestern Minnesota I have had boxes for 30 years during which time I have raised lots of bluebirds and have had only two nests of House Sparrows.

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Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

Annual General Meeting

Saturday, March 26, 1994

Lecture Room

Royal Botanical Gardens Headquarters, Burlington, Ontario

08:30 - 09:15	Registration ($4.00 members, $5.00 non-members) Viewing of Bucket Raffle Prizes and Display Table
09:20	Introduction and Business Meeting.....Bill Read Report of NABS AGM ..... Margaret and Art Rusnell Treasurer's Report.....Darlene and Rick Ryan Membership Report.....Darlene and Rick Ryan Club Reports .....Halton Bluebird Club
09:45	The Effects of Weather on EABL Populations.....Bill Read
10:00	Feeding Bluebirds in Winter.....T.B.A.
10:15	Feeding Nestling Bluebirds.....T.B.A.
10;30 - 10:45	Coffee Break
10:45 - 11:25	Ecology of Black-capped Chickadees .....Ted Cheskey
11:25 - 1:15	Lunch and Board of Directors' Meeting
1:15 - 2:15	A Review of Field Tests of Nestbox Designs and Predator Proofing of Nestboxes.....Kevin Berner
2:15 - 2:45	Coffee Break
2:45 - 3:30	Opossums: Their Role in Bluebird Ecology.....Bruce Duncan

Bucket Raffle Prizes

If you would like to contribute a nestbox or book, etc., you can bring it to the meeting and we will gladly enter it in the raffle.

Display Table

If you have an item you feel would be of interest to other birders, i.e. nestboxes, House Sparrow traps, etc., bring it along and we will put it on the display table.

Royal Botanical Gardens Headquarters, 680 Plains Road, Burlington, Ontario

From Toronto:
Take the QEW west to Burlington, then continue on Highway 403 west towards Hamilton. Take the Highway 6 north exit. At the first traffic lights, turn right onto Plains Road. At the next lights turn left (this is still Plains Road). The Royal Botanical Gardens Centre is about 1 km down on the right at Botanical Dr. Parking is available behind the building.

From North or West of Hamilton:
Take Highway 401 to Highway 6 south to Hamilton. Stay on Highway 6 past the intersection with Highway 5. Continue down a long hill (this is the Niagara Escarpment) until you come to a set of traffic lights (about 2 km past Highway 5). Turn left and travel about 0.5 km to another set of traffic lights (Plains Road). Turn left here. The Royal Botanical Gardens Centre is about 1 km along Plains Road on your right at Botanical Dr. Parking is available behind the building.

From South or West of Hamilton:
Take Highway 403 east through Hamilton, then take the exit to Highway 6 north. About 0.3 km past the exit ramp there is a set of traffic lights. Turn right here. Go about 0.5 km to another set of traffic lights (Plains Road) and turn left here. The Royal Botanical Gardens Centre is about 1 km along Plains Road on your right at Botanical Dr. Parking is available behind the building.