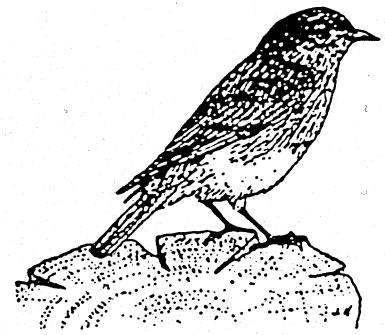


## Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

1998 Fall Newsletter

Editor: Bill Read

2-165 Green Valley Drive, Kitchener Ontario, N2P 1K3



Welcome to the 1998 Fall newsletter. What a year for Eastern bluebirds. In terms of reproductive success, this has been the best year in probably 40 years. There are probably more Eastern Bluebirds in Ontario now than since the late 1940's. Most Bluebirders recorded record numbers of fledglings in 1998. When the 1998 figures are tabulated I expect that the figure for fledged young per pair will be close to six, almost 50% greater than the long term average of 4.10.

Norm Shantz, from Ayr who has maintained a bluebird trail for over 40 years, had his best year ever with 121 fledged young. Doug Harrison, another longtime bluebirder, recorded 268 young from his trail near Norwich, another record. After a below average year in 1997, Don Wills, near Caledonia, fledged 721 young from his 305 boxes, 400 more than 1997 and 269 or 59.5% more than his record year in 1995. On the CWS trail I manage 300 EABL's were fledged from about 46 pairs or 6.52 young, the best ever per pair! Dennis and Gwen Lewington fledged 202 young from their trail on the Bruce Peninsula, also a record.

These numbers are not obtained without a lot of hard work, not to mention the thousands of kilometers necessary to properly monitor the boxes. Congratulations to all individuals who monitored EABL trails in 1998. It is because of these efforts that we still have an Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society.

The winter (see Chart) of 1997-98 was unusually warm. This meant that more bluebirds than usual survived to return to breed in 1998. Both January and February were much warmer than average (see chart). March started out very cold and stayed that way until the 25th. From the 26th to the 31st of March, temperatures were in the mid-teens and on two days were over 20°C.

The worst snowstorm of the winter occurred the night of March 20-21 preventing many people from attending our March 21st meeting at the Royal Botanical Gardens. Thirty-seven people were able to make it. Our feature speaker on Prothonotary Warblers, Dan Best, drove up from Ohio the day before so was able to miss most of the snowstorm. The Niagara Peninsula and many areas to the north of Lake Ontario were snowed in preventing OEBS members from attending.

As strange as this was, 5 days later we were in t-shirts enjoying the unusually warm weather which continued throughout the summer.

	Temperature (°C)		Precipitation (mm)	
	30 year Normal	Actual	Normal	Actual
September 97	14.3	14.3	89.6	39.0
October 97	8.0	8.7	70.4	53.5
November 97	2.5	1.1	83.1	63.4
December 97	-4.0	-2.3	79.2	42.8
January 98	-7.3	-3.1	54.3	105.8
February 98	-6.8	-1.6	55.6	32.4
March 98	-1.5	0.9	72.7	95.5
April 98	5.8	7.6	72.6	53.8
May 98	12.5	16.1	76.3	39.8
June 98	17.0	17.9	79.5	75.0
July 98	19.9	19.9	90.4	30.4

Weather data collected at the Waterloo Wellington Regional Airport, Waterloo, ON.

At the time of writing this, it has been the warmest year on record. The only drawback has been the lack of rain. In most areas, ponds that I have never seen dry were completely dried up by August. The water table has been lowered considerably and it may take several years to recover. This lack of rain did not seem to affect bluebirds, but will undoubtedly cause problems for amphibians, reptiles, and mammals.

There were very few reports of nestling mortality in 1998. Eastern bluebirds nested early and continued throughout the summer. May 1998 at 16.1°C was 3.6°C warmer than the long term average. This meant that very few young were lost to cold weather during May and the early part of June. This above average warm weather continued throughout the summer.

There were a number of reports of 3rd nestings, I had one pair in an orchard near St. George Ontario, that nested 3 times producing nine young. Both bluebirds were banded, the five year old male was recaptured at each nesting, the 4 year old female at two of the three nestings.

There were many sightings of EABL's throughout the winter. Hazel Bird who has maintained a trail since 1968 as part of the Willow Beach Naturalists Club, reported sightings of up to 12 EABL's each month throughout the winter. This trail is located in the Oak Ridges Moraine on the south shore of Rice Lake and this is the first time that bluebirds have ever overwintered. Hazel also reported a very successful year in 1998.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

**Lloyd Taman** from Timiskiming district, a long time bluebirder and taxidermist, reported trouble with red squirrels and chipmunks. Raccoons are not a problem and the last house sparrow was seen 10 years ago. We should all be so lucky. The last bluebirds seen in 1998 were September 15 for Cochrane and September 21 for Timiskiming. Lloyd has his boxes in forest clear cuts and has to move them every 4-5 years when the seedlings grow too tall.

It is with sadness that I tell you that **Ivanka Zuzek** died on May 12, 1998, after a long illness. I first met Hank and Ivanka on a FON trip in 1986 near Cambridge Ontario. It was Ivanka who persuaded Hank to go on the first bluebird trip. They were hooked on bluebirds from that point on. Both were on the executive and helped in the planning and running of the September 1996 North American Bluebird Society Conference held at RBG in Burlington and hosted by the OEBS. Ivanka will be sorely missed.

### **Nestboxes for Sale**

George Coker

Over the winter, George Coker has been very busy building bluebird boxes which are now for sale. George has designed a new box similar to the tree branch box that he calls the "mud room box". The cost of each box will be \$7.00-\$10.00. The proceeds from the sale of these boxes goes to the OEBS to fund special books like the BWD purple martin book.

This same box, if bought commercially with t-bar, would cost around \$25 plus tax.

**A properly located greased t-bar** will prevent raccoons and other climbing predators from gaining access to your nestbox. George will show you how to put the t-bar into the ground using a method he has perfected and will also explain how to place and monitor the nestboxes for best results. George can be contacted at 1-905-643-2033 or write, George Coker, 1330 Highway #8, Winona, ON L8E 5K6. Thanks again George for your support of the OEBS.

The October 1998 **Minnesota Bluebird** newsletter reports one of the very best years in bluebirding. Weather conditions in Ontario, New York State and Minnesota are somewhat similar and if one area does well, the others seem to follow.

### **Road Kills**

Don Wills recovered 8 bluebirds (7 young and 1 adult male) - all hit by cars along Mulligan Road where Don has some of his boxes and a large population of bluebirds. I recovered a recently fledged juvenile male by the side of the road at an orchard near St. George. This bird was from an unbanded natural cavity nesting in an old standard apple tree. Don also reported four newly fledged mockingbirds that immediately after fledging flew into a swimming pool and drowned. Any pool of water including bird baths that are too deep, can trap birds and drowned them. Most birds can swim in the water, but are unable to get themselves airborne unless they

that drowned in a rain barrel (the male was banded and nesting in an adjacent orchard). Putting something in the water like a piece of flat wood that they can crawl up on will help to stop this problem.

### **Bluebird Award**

The OEBS annually gives out an award to one or more individuals who have made a significant contribution to the conservation of the eastern bluebird. If you know of someone deserving of this award, send their name to me for consideration.

### **Eastern Bluebird Migration High Park, Toronto**

Since 1992, the greater Toronto raptor watch have been monitoring fall raptor numbers migrating by High Park from east to west.

In 1995, accurate counts were made of other birds besides raptors passing by the Hill lookout. The watch is located about 1-1/4 km. from the Lake Ontario shoreline. The hill where the watch coordinators observe the birds, is the highest point of land for many kilometers.

When Eastern Bluebirds flying along the Lake Ontario shoreline approach Toronto they can either fly north across the city, or follow the narrow strip of green along Lake Ontario. Most continue migrating by the Lake Ontario shoreline. This count is, in my opinion, a very reliable count, as an indicator of bluebird success. Holiday Beach and Thunder Cape EABL numbers are influenced more by weather conditions and peak reproductive success may not always correlate with increased numbers during migration . 1995 was an excellent year for EABL's and this was reflected in migration count numbers at High Park. Reproductive success in 1998 was exceptional and this was also reflected in migration numbers at this count (883 EABL up to November 18, 1998).

The migration numbers from 1995 to 1998 correlate nicely with the OEBS nestbox reports from those years (see charts).<sup>1</sup> The greater Toronto raptor watch is affiliated with the Toronto Ornithological Club and reports to their records committee.

A special thank you to Don Barnett for providing this information and to all the other count co-ordinators and watchers. This count data is very important in the overall monitoring of reproductive success of EABL's and other species.

If you would like more information about the greater Toronto Raptor watch, contact John Barker at 4101 Westminister Place No. 55 Mississauga L4W 4X4, telephone # 1-905-281-3073

# The Greater Toronto Raptor Watch

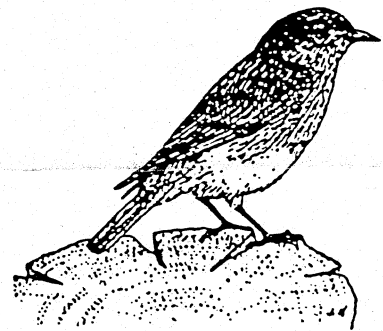
Eastern Bluebirds on Migration, Fall 1998

Data submitted by Don Barnett

Site: High Park Toronto, Ontario

Viewing Period: September 1 to November 18, 1998

Date	Number
September 6	1
September 23	10
September 28	162
September 29	23
September 30	4
October 1	1
October 2	4
October 4	6
October 8	50
October 9	83
October 10	20
October 11	6
October 14	5
October 16	6
October 20	87
October 21	105
October 22	61
October 23	17
October 27	15
October 28	6
October 29	19
October 30	89
October 31	10
November 1	7
November 3	5
November 4	5
November 5	10
November 6	6
November 13	57
November 18	8
Total to Nov. 18/98	883



## The Greater Toronto Raptor Watch 1995-1998

1995	649
1996	407
1997	461
1998	883

## 97 Christmas Bird Count

Count Period - December 20, 1996 - January 5, 1997

	EABL's
Blenheim	4
Cambridge	5
Cedar Creek	99
Fisherville	7
Hamilton	CW
Kingston	CW
Kettlepoint	2
London	1
Long Point	35
Napanee	6
Niagara Falls On, NY	38
Port Colborne	8
Point Pelee	4
St. Catherines	26
St. Thomas	4
Strathroy	3
Westport	CW
Woodhouse	10
Total	252

Christmas bird counts give us some idea of reproductive success but numbers can be influenced by weather conditions and available food supply. Most of the bluebirds during this count period, were in the Niagara Peninsula and areas near the north shore of Lake Erie around Windsor (Cedar Creek-99). I am expecting that the 98 count numbers given reproductive success in 1998 will be at record levels. (The 98 count will be included in the 1999 Spring Newsletter.)

## History and Current status of the Eastern Bluebird

W.F. Read, Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society, Kitchener, ON

(Article reprinted from Bird Trends, a report on results of National Ornithological Surveys in Canada. Number 6, spring 1998, CWS Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H3)

The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is a cherished sight for birdwatchers across its range in eastern North America. It held a special place in the folklore of our early settlers who welcomed it as a true harbinger of spring. Originally, bluebirds were limited to forest fire burns, clearings created by indigenous peoples, prairie openings and edge areas. The settlers did much to provide new nesting habitat for bluebirds by clearing the dense forests that covered eastern North America. The wooden posts and uprooted trees that fenced farm fields and enclosures provided a new source of nest cavities. These combined factors helped bluebirds become abundant across eastern North America, likely reaching population peaks in the mid-to late 1800's.

The introduction of species like the House Sparrow and European Starling in the mid-to late-19th century created problems for bluebirds nesting in settled areas. These more aggressive species out-compete bluebirds for nesting cavities resulting in low bluebird productivity. However, both these competitors show significant long-term population declines across most of their range according to BBS data (1966-94 Canada-wide trends: HOSP -2.0, N=379, p,0.05; EUST -1.7, N=484, p,0.05)

Despite this competition, bluebirds remained common to abundant well into the 20th century, and were still common in the 1940's. After that time, changing farm practices (including larger farms, fewer wooden posts, more T-bars and barbed wire) reduced the available nest cavities, as did the expansion of urban areas.

Cold weather, on both the wintering and breeding grounds, can also severely reduce bluebird numbers. Up

until the 1940's populations appeared to recover to former levels within a few years of weather-related declines. After about 1950, however, rebounds appear to fail, and declines continued until the drastic losses following the harsh winters of 1978-79 and 1979-80. This failure to recover may be partly linked to the expansion of starlings from urban to rural areas.

The North American Bluebird society (NABS) was founded in 1978 to respond to the continued decline of the Eastern Bluebird by establishing nest box trails. Bluebird trails are believed to have played a major role in bringing bluebirds back to many areas, and provide a means to monitor populations. In Canada, the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society (OEBS), through its Nestbox Survey, has asked volunteers to report on the occupancy, number of eggs and fledging success of bluebirds since 1987. Nestbox trails in other parts of Canada also provide data useful for estimating Eastern Bluebird population levels.

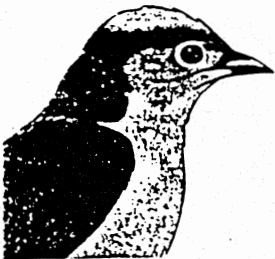
### STATUS

In 1984, concern over declining bluebirds resulted in *vulnerable status* from the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) (Risley, 1984). At that time the known Canadian population was only 383 pairs, although the actual population was thought to be closer to 1000 pairs. Since then, population estimates have been revised as new data were gathered. *The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas* (Risley 1987) documented breeding evidence for Eastern Bluebirds in 702 of 1824 squares with between 2 and 10 pairs in most squares. The OEBS nest box summary (McNicholl et al., 1994) reported that, in 1987, 1222 pairs fledged approximately 4950 young thanks to milder winters and monitored, predator-proof nest boxes.

Poorly-located or unmonitored nest boxes allow competitors a foothold in the area, from which they can usurp even well-maintained boxes. Every effort should be made to remove nest boxes from bluebird trails that will no longer be monitored and maintained.

Adequate predator protection ensures that bluebirds attracted to nestboxes have a reasonable chance of success.

For more information, contact the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society, #2-165 Green Valley Dr., Kitchener, On N2P 1K3 (519)748-4853



The Ontario population is likely higher than given in the atlas. Breeding was confirmed in 423 squares during the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Southern Quebec (Banville and Robert 1996). Because several pairs often breed in one 10km x 10km atlas square, this number likely underestimates the population. The EPOQ checklist program cites significant increases in bluebirds from 1970-1991, but this is at least partly due to birds moving from natural forest-edge cavities to nest box trails where they are more readily detected (Fragner 1995).

The Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas (Erskine 1992) estimates fewer than 300 pairs in New Brunswick and approximately 30 pairs in Nova Scotia and 5 in Prince Edward Island. Forest clearcuts provide a new source of habitat, and numbers of birds are believed to be increasing. Interestingly, bluebirds in the Maritimes have been slow to accept nest box trails, and only a few have attracted birds (Erskine 1992).

The Eastern Bluebird also appears to be increasing in the western part of its range, although the available data are largely anecdotal. Approximately 400 pairs now nest in Manitoba (Read and Alvo 1996), but fluctuations in numbers follow cold winters and yearly variation in bluebird trail effort. Bird atlases report confirmed breeding in 21 squares and unconfirmed breeding in 9 others in Saskatchewan (Smith 1996), and 1 confirmed breeding record in Alberta (Semenchuck 1992). Eastern bluebirds are gradually replaced by Mountain Bluebirds at the western edge of their range.

Eastern Bluebird populations have increased over the last decade (Tables 7 and 8), earning a revised status of *not at risk*. An updated status report (Read and Alvo, 1996) recommends annual monitoring through nest box surveys. Currently, only Ontario has a standardized program, which may adequately monitor national status. Bluebirds will always be vulnerable to harsh winters, but continued effort to maintain both natural and man-made nesting cavities should ensure the continued presence of these lovely birds.

Table 7. Number of known pairs of Eastern Bluebirds in Canada, 1980 and 1996 (from Read and Alvo, 1996).

Province	1980	1996
Nova Scotia	0	30
New Brunswick	1	300
P.E.I.	0	5
Quebec	56	273
Ontario	236	2060
Manitoba	50	400
Saskatchewan	40	15
Alberta	0	1
<b>CANADA</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>3049</b>

Table 8. Canadian Breeding Bird Survey trends for Eastern Bluebird by ecoregion and nationally.1

Ecoregion	1966-94	1966-79	1980-94
Boreal Shield	2.7*	7.6	3.6
Mixedwood Plains	1.2	10.7*	4.1*
Canada	2.0*	-1.2	4.5**

\* = 0.05, p, 0.15; \*\* = p, 0.05  
1 from Downes and Collins 1996.

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### **Sparrows meet trouble in Joplin, Missouri**

Reprinted from *Bluebirds Forever*, Winter '97, Project Bluebird, Joplin, MO. Harold Cox, editor.

We met a lady this fall, who wanted a bluebird box in her backyard. At first, we thought we would not be able to help her. She lived far enough into the interior of Joplin that this would disqualify most people from having a box. As we have said before, sparrows and starlings rule the cities as far as cavity nesting birds are concerned. But this lady lived adjacent to a wooded area and has frequently seen bluebirds. We are always willing to place a box in town if there have been regular bluebird sightings.

She told us how she had ridded herself of sparrows, so this was a plus too. A few years back, she bought a sparrow trap and trapped close to 300 sparrows over several years. When we asked what she did with all those sparrows she explained that she had been raised on a farm and she just "wrung their little necks". We know that this method of sparrow control will offend some of our readers, so we will have this lady remain anonymous. Good luck with your nesting box! We would love to have bluebirds back in Joplin.

THESE COORDINATORS ARE READY TO HELP YOU....

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**Halton County**  
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Burlington L7R 3X5  
905-335-4688

Henry Bauer  
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905-893-6690

**Timiskaming District**  
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705-565-2253

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Stoney Creek L8G 3V5  
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905-344-7661

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**Essex County**  
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**Middlesex County**  
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**Oxford County**  
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