

Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

1998 Spring Newsletter

Editor: Bill Read

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

Welcome to the 1998 Spring Newsletter.



Our AGM is set for Saturday March 21 at the Royal Botanical Gardens, headquarters, Burlington. This year's feature speakers will be Dan Best from Ohio, discussing Prothonotary Warblers and Hillary Pittel on Bird rehabilitation. Dan Best and two of his friends are coming from Ohio for this presentation. They have a very successful prothonotary program in Ohio. Don Wills of the OEBS will discuss his efforts and successes with prothonotary nestboxes in Ontario and give us an overview of their current breeding status. Hillary Pittel will discuss bird rehabilitation and Avian injuries.

At the time of writing this newsletter, we are experiencing one of the warmest winters on record. This should bode well for returning bluebirds as more should survive through the winter. We certainly could still get some nasty weather. Last spring was bitterly cold (see Fall 97 Newsletter) but it could also be another 1995 when record numbers of bluebirds returned to breed successfully. Let's hope so!

Nestboxes for Sale George Coker

Over the winter, George Coker has been very busy building Bluebird boxes which are now for sale. George is selling these at \$7.00 each with the proceeds going to OEBS. Some t-bars are available at \$2.00 each and George will bolt these to the boxes for you. Projects and donations like this help us pay for special books like the BWD purple martin book. This same box, if bought commercially with t-bar, would cost around \$20-\$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.

Spring OEBS Bluebird Trip

On Saturday May 23rd, I will be leading a full day Bluebird trip for OEBS members near St. George Ontario. During the day we will be trapping and banding adult and immature eastern bluebirds. We will also observe some of the kestrel boxes that are nearby. Meet at Willie's Restaurant, St. George at 9:30 a.m., Saturday May 23, 1998. Phone 1-519-748-4853 to confirm and to be put on the list. There is no charge for this trip.

1997 Nestbox Survey

If you have not sent in your 1997 survey results, there is still time to do so. Please include the number of bluebird pairs on your trail. If you had no bluebirds, still send in your results.

OEBS.AGM Saturday March 21, 1998

A G E N D A

9:00 - 9:30	Registration
9:30 - 9:45	Business Meeting
	- President's report
	- Treasurer's report
10:00 - 10:30	Don Wills, Prothonotary Warblers in Ontario
10:30 - 10:50	Coffee Break
10:50 - 12:00	Keynote Speaker
	Dan Best, Prothonotary Warblers in Ohio
12:00 - 1:30	Lunch
1:30 - 2:30	Hillary Pittel, Avian Injuries and Bluebird rehabilitation
2:30 - 2:50	Coffee Break
2:50 - 3:30	TBA Bluebirds
3:30 - 3:45	Bucket Raffle Draw

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 any 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 Hwy 403 west towards Hamilton. Take the Hwy 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 Hwy 401 to Hwy 6 south to Hamilton. Stay on Hwy 6 past the intersection with Hwy 5. Continue down a long hill (this is the Niagara Escarpment) until you come to traffic lights (about 2 km past Hwy 5). Turn left and travel about 0.5km onto another set of traffic lights (Plains Rd). Turn left here. The Royal Botanical 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 Hwy 403 east through Hamilton, then take the exit to Hwy 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.

House Wrens Aren't the Only Troublesome Ones

House wrens are persistent predators on the eggs and nests of bluebirds and other species in "their" territory, to the sorrow of many a bluebirder. A recent study by Picman and Isabelle (Auk 112:183-191) on the relationship between yellow-headed blackbirds and marsh wrens confirmed after two years of observation that of 51% blackbird failed nests, 86% or the failures were attributed to predation, and of those the overwhelming majority was by marsh wrens.

In addition, there was a strong correlation between blackbird success and distance from marsh wren territories, the further the distance the less predation. Yellow-headed blackbirds are aggressive toward marsh wrens for good reason. yellow-headed blackbirds are bigger than wrens, and can exclude them from the inside of their breeding colony, but the edges receive much predation. The Blackbirds are not aggressive to other avian neighbors like the common yellowthroat which are not predators. Wrens immediately colonized an area which blackbirds left.

Could that be one reason why yellow-headed blackbirds change their nesting areas from year to year, seldom being observed in the same marshy place in consecutive years?

Reprinted from the
Bluebird Recovery Program Newsletter Feb.1998
Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis
Box 3801
Minneapolis, MN 55403

NABS: Better than ever

The North American Bluebird Society, 20 years old this year, has been undergoing many changes, besides the headquarters move to Darling, Wisconsin. It has become a continental (U.S., Canada and Bermuda) umbrella organization, with many small and large bluebird societies affiliating. It is helping more bluebird organizations to get started. With NABS membership there will be a new information packet, various approved nestbox plans available for purchase, and its highly regarded quarterly journal *Sialia* will continue with some upward changes. BBRP was the first bluebird organization to announce affiliation; some of our board members have been board members of NABS, and are participating in the positive changes.

Present Membership Dues:

Senior (60 & over)	\$10.00
(U.S.) Other countries (add \$3.00)	
Regular	\$15.00
Family	\$25.00
Sustaining	\$50.00
Contributing	\$100.00

Send to: NABS, Box 74, Darlington, WI 53530-0074.

Web site:

<http://www.cobleskill.edu/nabs/state>

The 1998 Annual NABS Conference, bringing bluebirders from all over the continent, will be held in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada June 25-28.

When subscribing send a postal money order in U.S. funds. Cheques are not accepted.



National Audubon Society Introduces Resolution Regarding Free-Ranging Cats

According to a recent American Veterinary Medical Association survey, there are at least 59 million pet cats in the U.S. (over 66 million if feral cats are included). Scientific studies in several states and countries indicate domestic cats are killing songbirds at rates in the hundreds of millions (39 million birds killed by Wisconsin home-based cats alone). Their other prey - small rodents, reptiles and amphibians - also take away food from natural predators. Free-ranging cats, which lead a miserable existence, have spread disease to other cats, including mountain lions like the endangered Florida panther. They should be trapped and humanely destroyed.

National Audubon Society Chapters, including Minneapolis, are endorsing a national resolution urging stricter enforcement of cat licensing and leash laws. Minneapolis has an ordinance (Chapter 64.5): Dogs and cats must be leashed or "effectively restrained" (not just voice control). Owners must clean up feces of cats and dogs. Violation is a petty misdemeanor, with fines up to \$200. Brooklyn Park, MN Ordinance is similar. Check the fine print in your community's ordinances. You may find leash laws and licensing apply to all "domestic pets", not just dogs. If you have access to internet, you can read more at: www.wisc.edu/wildlife/extension/catfly3.htm. It's better for cats, better for wildlife, and better for the community, if domestic cats are indoors all the time.

Kent Borcharding, Hazel Green, WI, is constantly coming up with new experiments and projects (most recently an attempt to entice a huge bat colony out of an old 1840 barn in a state park, and into bat houses 1/3 mile away). Kent sent an article from a local newspaper, "At last, help for Tweety", describing a cat collar that really works to warn birds of an approaching cat. A team of electrical and engineering students from UW-Madison working under Prof. Stanley Temple, a researcher on free-ranging cats, have developed a collar that emits a high-frequency "eep" that birds recognize as a signal of danger. Three "eeps" per minute, lightweight (45 grams) and a magnetic on-off switch activated when a cat passes through a pet door are some of the features. The National Audubon Society is eager to endorse the project, according to Temple. The obvious question is: how are we going to get cat owners, who let their pets run free, to purchase and use the collar?

Prothonotary Warbler Nest Boxes

Predation has a definite effect on nest initiation and clutch size in cavity nesters, according to a recent study of Prothonotary Warblers by Charles Blem and others, reported in *Sialia*, Winter 1998 (p.3). During the first eight years of a ten-year study, prothonotary warbler nestboxes were attached to trees in tidal swamps, where predation exceeded 30%. In 1994 and 1995, the boxes were moved to metal poles. A very definite decrease in predation resulted, and nest initiation and clutch size increased. Prothonotary warblers prefer nest boxes over water in shady locations, and in fact prefer man-made boxes to natural cavities. Of 300 nest boxes, eastern bluebirds used 29. Others were used by Carolina Chickadees (14), tufted titmice (3) and Carolina Wrens (20).

Once the nest boxes were switched to metal poles from trees, the rate of nest box use increased significantly, and they were used more frequently for the second brood. An increase in clutch size was also evident. As is true with bluebirds, the first clutch laid was usually larger than the subsequent brood.

Reprinted from the Bluebird Recovery Program Newsletter, February 1998.

New Mountain Bluebird Book

Andrew Troyer, Pennsylvania author of the little booklet "Bring Back the Bluebirds Even on Your Hands" recommends a new book (131 pages, 12 color photos) by Helen M. Johnson, entitled *Living with Mountain Bluebirds*. It recounts observations from her window in the White Mountains of Arizona. It is available at \$13.50 postpaid from Helen M. Johnson, 6011 E. Vernon Ave., Scottsdale AZ 85257-1945.

Breeding Dispersal of Eastern Bluebirds Depends on Nesting Success, not Removal of Old Nests

The study results of well-known bluebird researchers Patricia Gowaty and Jon Plissner's, printed in *Journal of Field Ornithology*, Summer 1997, do not support Wayne Davis' theory that returning bluebirds prefer to renest in boxes containing old nests. Returns both in season and next season depended more on whether bluebirds had successful broods before. Clean boxes or uncleaned boxes were not significantly different. If nests were successful, 56% returned the next year, if not successful, only 15% returned. In the same season, 72% of individual bluebirds stayed at their original breeding sites when boxes were cleaned. 57% renested in unclean boxes. To sum: There were no significant differences in within - and between - season, dispersal from cleaned versus uncleaned boxes. The difference in dispersal was due to previous nesting success. The researchers did not find any difference in predation or decreased health in nestlings when unclean boxes were reused.

Are your Boxes safe from Predators? Hang 'em high

We've written about Dick Purvis's success with his hanging nestboxes and box lifter a number of times. Not only does Dick have extensive trails but he has a higher (than average) success ratio than most bluebirders. Dick averages 4 to 5 birds per box. This, compared to the Statewide average of 2.3. Dick attributes the success to his method - which puts the nestboxes out of reach of the common predators: cats, raccoons, and kids.

Dick's system works well in the manicured parks, golf courses and cemeteries in Southern California. Hatch Graham has tried it in blue oaks in the Central California foothills and finds that some pruning is necessary to clear a spot on a branch for easy access.

Dick's design for the box is shown to the right. He mounts the hanger in the middle as shown. Howard Rathlesberger has the hook made of wires attached to both sides of the box.

On the other hand, Hatch makes a curved semi-bail that is attached on the back of the box and curves up and forward over the front of the box to accommodate the heavier branches in the oak trees.

He uses #9 wire as Dick does and forms the curve around a 7" jar. The high point of the curve is over the midpoint of the box so the box hangs straight. The base of the wire is bent and peened square in a vise and inserted in the back of the box. Then the extension is bent up before the box is assembled. A groove is cut in the centre of the back overhang of the roof to keep the hanger from moving laterally. A staple at the top will also work.

Editor's Note

There are many areas in Ontario where this box could be used very effectively. Cemeteries, large urban parks would provide an ideal setting (any area where human disturbance is a problem).

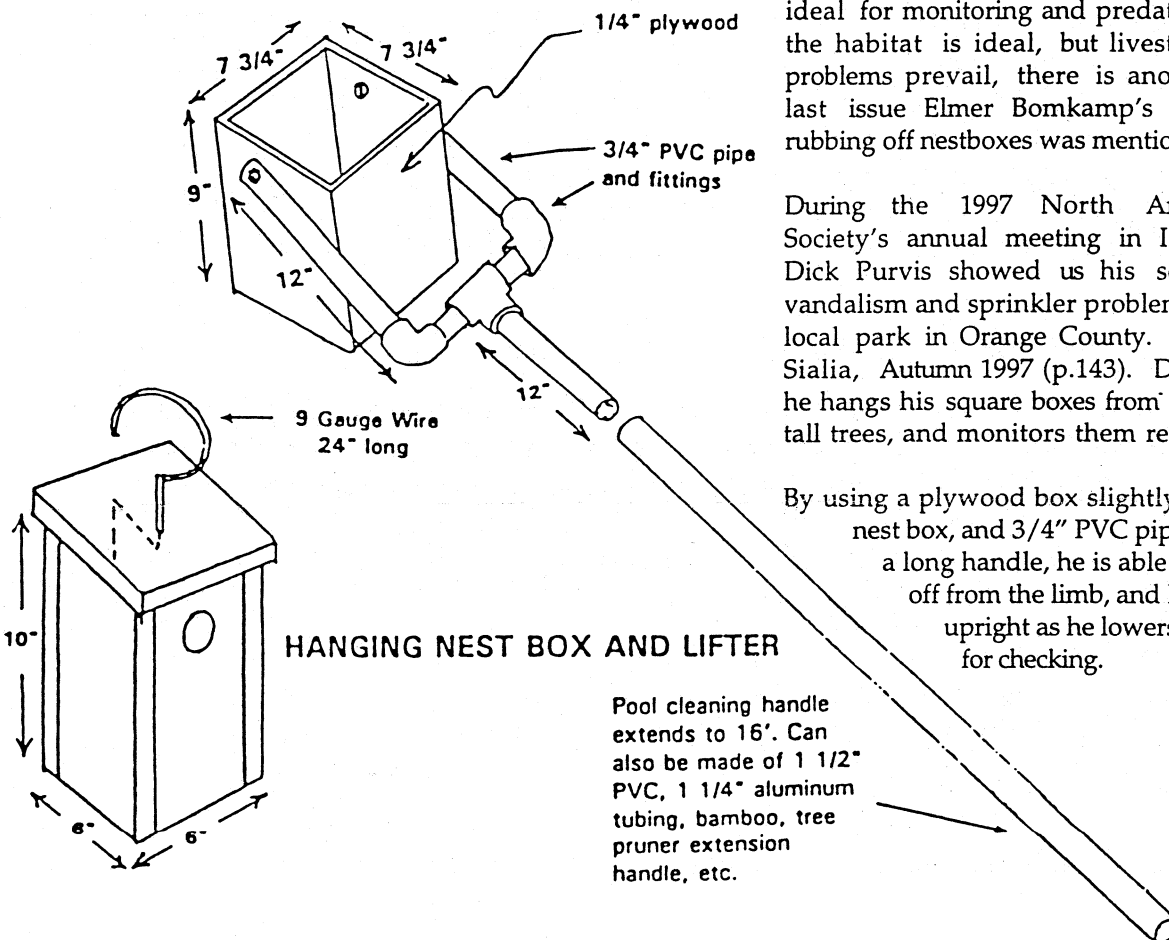
By locating the boxes at least 15-20' in the air, it would also deter raccoons. In his article for Sialia, Autumn 1997 (p.143) Dick describes how he hangs his square boxes from the lower limbs of tall trees, and monitors them regularly. (Article extracted from California Bluebird Recovery Program Newsletter, vol 3., No. 4 Winter 1998-98).

"HANGING IT UP"

Positioning bluebird boxes on smooth metal poles is ideal for monitoring and predator control. When the habitat is ideal, but livestock or vandalism problems prevail, there is another way. In our last issue Elmer Bomkamp's solution to cattle rubbing off nestboxes was mentioned.

During the 1997 North American Bluebird Society's annual meeting in Irvine, California, Dick Purvis showed us his solution to thwart vandalism and sprinkler problems in a very public local park in Orange County. In his article for Sialia, Autumn 1997 (p.143). Dick describes how he hangs his square boxes from the lower limbs of tall trees, and monitors them regularly.

By using a plywood box slightly larger than the nest box, and 3/4" PVC pipe and fittings, plus a long handle, he is able to lift the nest box off from the limb, and keeps the box upright as he lowers it to the ground for checking.



Pool cleaning handle extends to 16'. Can also be made of 1 1/2" PVC, 1 1/4" aluminum tubing, bamboo, tree pruner extension handle, etc.

Prothonotary Warbler Recovery by Don Wills

The unique Carolinian deciduous forest that runs along the north shore of Lake Erie is home to some of the rarest and most beautiful birds in Canada. One which nests in wooded swamps is the Prothonotary Warbler. This cavity nesting warbler is named for its brilliant golden yellow head and neck which is the same colour as the hoods worn by prothonotaries or chief clerks of certain courts. When seen closeup, the golden neck is complimented with a bluish-gray back and wings and a medium gray underbelly. Females are slightly plainer but still possess the brilliant golden head set off with black beak and eyes.

Sadly, Prothonotary Warblers have now been classified as a critically endangered species in Canada. Populations have crashed in the last decade over their entire North American territory. Because this warbler requires a specific nesting area usually in wooded swamps, lack of habitat is the number one cause for its reduction. However, by being a cavity nesting bird, extreme competition for nest cavities by wrens and Tree Swallows as well as Cowbird parasitism are also major factors in the decline. Long Point Bird Observatory developed a nestbox program for spring 1997. Their idea was to set out proper nestboxes in Prothonotary Warbler historic breeding areas. Hopefully some of the remaining pairs would use these safe nestboxes and begin to rebuild the population.

In April 1997, I was able to set up a nestbox experiment in one of these historic breeding areas. Four completely different nest boxes mounted on steel posts were placed approximately three feet above water. Two boxes were miniature versions of my wooden bluebird boxes, one was made from a natural cavity and one was made from 4" PVC plastic pipe. All were painted camouflage and placed as a group in the swamp away from logs or overhanging branches.

Male prothonotary warblers arrive in the nesting area by mid-May to find nest cavities and establish territory. Males add moss to nests and usually make many dummy nests. When females arrive, sometimes weeks later, they pick the appropriate nestbox or cavity and finish the nest. Males are more attracted to the area if nestboxes are placed in groups.

My first check of the site was on June 6. The two wooden and natural cavity boxes were unused but when I reached the PVC box, I quickly learned how loud these golden headed beauties can screech! Both adults blasted me as soon as I checked the nest.

Prothonotary females make a nest of moss and dry leaves, building it to a level just under the entrance hole. This enables the female to watch out the opening while incubating eggs.

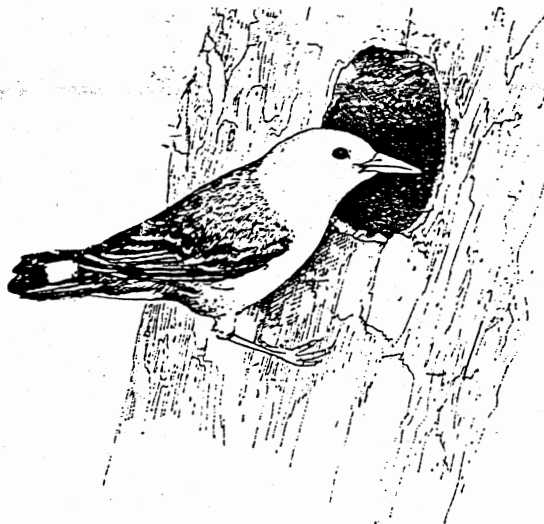
This box made from four inch PVC plastic pipe had an oval 1-3/8" round hole. The nest contained eight eggs and could be seen clearly through the opening with a flashlight. On further inspection with the top removed, four of the eggs were slightly larger with brown specks instead of the warbler's characteristic mahogany brown splotches. A small female cowbird had squeezed through this enlarged oval opening and if the box had not been monitored, the warblers' nesting season would have been lost.

As it turned out, three fledged Prothonotaries left this box, and two days later this same pair of adults started a new nest in the next adjacent box. This nestbox produced four fledglings and had no problems with predators or cowbirds. This rare double brood produced seven fledglings and was monitored weekly from June 6 until July 27.

It was the earliest nesting pair found in Ontario in 1997, as the late cold spring kept many females from arriving on the nesting areas until late June. Overall, the total population of Prothonotary Warblers in Canada was approximately 35 birds with nestboxes attracting over half the existing pairs. Natural cavities were still used but without proper monitoring, cowbird parasitism remains a major threat.

Although this initial experimental nestbox program was quite successful, it will take many years of careful field work to insure a healthy population. Monitored nestbox trails saved the Eastern Bluebird and provide needed housing for tree swallows and purple martins. However, purple martins are now completely dependent on these artificial homes and bluebirds seldom use natural cavities when nestboxes are available.

Prothonotary Warbler populations will never be large and there is a danger of over saturation of nestboxes causing them also to become dependent. Therefore a healthy mix of nestboxes and safe natural cavities might ensure the future of this fantastic warbler.



Prothonotary Warbler by Judie Shore

The Dangers Posed by Cats

by David M. Bird

(Reprinted from Bird Watcher's Digest, May/June 1997, Vol. 19, No. 5)

I was having a snack in my kitchen on one of those fat, lazy summer afternoons, when suddenly some high-pitched squawking assailed my ears through the window. Some poor creature was screaming bloody blue murder! I stepped out onto the deck to glimpse a jet black cat carry a very live fledgling robin or black bird fluttering in its jaws.

When the cat saw me, it immediately darted with its prey to the short shrubs in the farthest reaches of our backyard. It laid down its struggling victim, likely holding it down with a paw, and just stared at me. I angrily ran toward it, shaking my fist and yelling at the top of my lungs. Then the cat did something I shall never forget. Instead of immediately fleeing the scene without its victim, it defiantly and calmly grasped the struggling, shrieking baby bird in its mouth, and sauntered off under the fence.

That was a couple of years ago. Just last fall, I had another altercation with felines in my backyard. Four cats, the owners of two of which I knew, had adopted my yard as their private hunting reserve. I had been feeding birds for about eight years with great success, but recently I had noticed that there were now many days without any birds present at the feeders. A sign hanging by the feeders might have read: Warning! Unsafe Area - Feed At Your Own Risk.

As the days passed with hardly a bird in the yard, including my long-standing steadiest customers, a pair of Northern Cardinals, I grew angry and frustrated. If the cats were mine, I could take steps to minimize their contact with my feeder birds. Alas, they are not. Nevertheless, they still invade my yard and scare away the birds, despite my efforts to chase them away.

But here's the rub! If the trespassing animals were dogs, I could simply call the local animal control officers and have the offenders caught and taken to their owners, or worse, to the pound. Dog owners have to keep their pets restrained on a leash, but cat owners can let their pets run free. And yes, I am aware that dogs do present a more dangerous, physical threat to humans than cats. On the other hand, ask someone who has lost a child to toxoplasmosis, a parasitic disease that can be contracted while playing amid the feline feces in a sandbox, what they think about cats roaming free.

By now, readers who are cat owners are probably fuming at me, labeling me a staunch, foaming-at-the-mouth cat hater. They could not be further from the truth! Actually, as a lover of predatory creatures, I have always been fascinated by cats, both the domestic and wild versions. Their sleek, athletic bodies and round, intelligent faces make them hard not to love and respect.

Should we as bird lovers be concerned about this booming love affair with cats? You bet we should! The impact of cats, both pet and feral versions, on bird population is enormous, and there are studies to prove it.

Way back in 1949, a Michigan study revealed that a single well-fed cat brought home 1600 small mammals (mostly mice) and 60 birds in an 18-month period. In a highly publicized study run from 1981 to 1982, Peter Churcher and John Lawton asked all cat owners in an English village to save the prey brought home by their cats. After one year, 1090 items were tallied. Churcher and Lawton estimated that a third of all sparrow deaths are due to cats, and that pet cats kill more than 70 million animals, including 20 million birds, in England each year. Moreover, because cats only bring home about half their kills, that number could be doubled.

Want more? A four-year study by Stanley Temple and John Coleman estimated that 1.2 million pet cats in Wisconsin kill 400 million animals each year, including at least 7.8 million birds. The most vulnerable bird species are bobolinks, meadowlarks, and field-ranging sparrows, all ground nesters hunted by farm cats (up to 4 cats per farm). Temple refers to the cat as "the principal mammalian predator of birds in North America".

In an independent study, William and Marian George of Southern Illinois University also monitored, in three, four-year stages the prey captured by well-fed neutered house cats on Wisconsin farms. Birds, again mostly ground-foragers, made up 8% of the vertebrate prey; most were caught from May to July. The cats ate 62% of the birds they killed.

Here are some Canadian statistics: Bob Bancroft, a Nova Scotia biologist, used the above numbers in 1992 to estimate an annual kill of 42 to 70 million birds by roughly 5 million cats in Canada.

Recently, Project Feeder Watch, based at Cornell University, used survey data from North American households feeding birds to determine that domestic outdoor cats were second only to sharp-shinned hawks in number of prey taken at feeders. Cats were involved in nearly a third of 567 incidents reported, and cats that did not normally hunt were indeed tempted when feeders were around. Only a relatively small proportion of house cats, i.e. 4% cause frequent deaths at feeders; but the report, neglected to mention that whether they are being killed or not, birds inherently fear cats and will avoid areas that they frequent.

I do admit that some cats genuinely show little interest in killing backyard birds, and still others that derive more entertainment from stalking and chasing away squirrels, well-known competitors for birdseed and themselves predators of tree-nesting birds in the egg and nestling stages.

The cat-versus-bird issue is a very sensitive one indeed. I recall a conversation in Montreal last fall with Barbara Young, who is the executive officer of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, a venerable institution dedicated to the conservation of birds in Great Britain. When I raised the issue of my battles with neighborhood cats, she rolled her eyes and said, "We've been trying to duck that issue for years!" Apparently about half of their million members own cats. Even more sensitive is the fact that John Lawton, one of the two scientists who conducted the study of the killer cats in an English village, serves on their board now.

In Australia, a war is being waged upon all cats. Richard Evans, a member of Parliament, is pushing a plan to eradicate all the country's 20 million cats by the year 2020. And he is not just talking about feral cats!

Evans told the Parliament that cats, which are not native to Australia, could easily turn wild and destroy indigenous wildlife. He wants to limit households to two cats maximum, neuter all domestic cats over ten years old, and introduce fatal feline diseases into the wild to kill off the wild cats (as Australia has done with the rabbit population).

Well, he's right about the extent of the feral cat problem. In the Diamantina region west of Brisbane, some 3 million feral cats are killing off letter-winged kites and rabbit-eared bandicoots to the point of near extinction. With as many as 640 cats in a ten-kilometer area, it is possible to see 30 cats sitting in one tree! Queensland government biologists have resorted to shooting them. According to the National Parks and Wildlife Services in Australia, domestic cats each kill an estimated 25 native animals a year, and feral cats kill as many as 1000 each year. "Cats are responsible for 39 species being extinct, locally extinct, or near-extinct in Australia," said Evans.

The impact of feral cats is by no means limited to Australia. Yet another endangered species, the Bahama parrot, is losing ground to feral cats on those grounds, and drastic steps are being taken to control feline numbers. In Massachusetts in 1991, a house cat killed all the week-old chicks of a colony of threatened least terns. Out west, California quail are declining and throughout North America, ground-nesting meadowlarks are decreasing by 10% annually, both declines due in part to cat predation.

I have had my own battles with feral cats on my university campus over the years. When I walk home each night and pass by a large dumpster, sitting around and staring at me as if to say, "there he goes - that cat hater! Psfftttt!" are often no fewer than eight cats. If I take one step toward them, they all bolt in different directions like members of a street gang. I wonder if any of them are the offspring of the feral cat that killed seven captive-bred American kestrels in a two-night period by grabbing them through the wire-mesh floor of their cages one summer at the Avian Science and Conservation Centre. An electrified wire stopped that problem.

Whatever the problem is feral cats causing the extinction of wildlife or house cats killing and chasing away birds from backyard feeders, what solutions can we come up with? It's highly unlikely that Evans' proposed legislation to get rid of all cats in Australia by 2020 would even clear the starting gate here in North America. Cat owners are, in general, a tight bunch and will fight tooth and claw any legislation designed to curtail ownership or behaviour. In Syracuse, New York, an attempt to pass a law limiting the number of household cats failed, as did a proposed leash law for cats in Edmonton, Alberta.

But some legislative successes with cat control have been achieved. New Zealand cat owners now contend with a leash law, and the Australian government has called on Victoria residents to keep their cats indoors between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. (to reduce breeding, and hence the creation of more feral cats) or face fines of \$90. And recently, a new law in Piscataway, New Jersey, requiring cats to be leashed or kept inside has got cat owners very upset.

The question here in North American becomes: do we need to pass restrictive legislation to curtail the growing cat problem, or can we rely on public education to resolve the problem? After all, there are many ways that cat owners themselves can lessen the impact of their pets on wildlife populations, as well as on the popular hobby of bird watching.

First, I am not convinced that cats need to be let outdoors to run free. If you are concerned about your cat's health and well-being, consider a suggestion by Pam Johnson, writing in *Cats* magazine (September 1994). She recommends keeping one's cat inside to prolong its life. Apparently, free-roaming cats live only three to five years, while indoor ones live 17 years or more because they are not exposed to cars, dogs, or disease, which kill 1.5 million cats a year. And how many stories have you heard about the family's cat suddenly developing wanderlust, causing anxiety and sadness among family members.

The idea is to make indoors more comfortable for the cat. Provide a good scratching post (perhaps more than one) in a location where it will be seen. Install an outdoor tree (commercially available) near a window with access to the sun. Play with your cat frequently and use interactive toys. Leave surprises for your cat, e.g., a toy in paper bag, while you are at work, and grow some indoor grass (there are kits) for your cat to nibble on. Use and grow catnip, and provide a large litter box that you clean often. Enjoy your cat's company.

Okay, some of you are sympathetic about the predation problem and want to take action, but you are not about to start keeping your cat locked indoors permanently after having allowed it out for several years. A number of my friends have trained their cats to walk on a leash, while others have built a pen or run or even screened in their porch. I also know cat owners who have successfully kept their cats on leash-runs.

If you feel you must let your cat run free, then attach one or more bells to its collar. However, be advised that the tinkling likely won't work for birds, but will for mammals. And if you think that because your cat is declawed, it can't catch birds, think again. Cats are quite adept at knocking birds down from the air with only their paws. Perhaps the best compromise is to control the time of day and season that you let your cat out. Birds are most active during early morning and early evening. And the less you shoo your cat out of the door in the breeding season, i.e., from June to August, the fewer baby birds will be killed. When the snows come and cover is hard to come by for a stalking cat, the predation problem is hardly a serious one.

Here's something you can and must do. At the very least, help control the feral cat problem by having your cat neutered or spayed within six months of obtaining it. Like rats and rabbits, cats have an amazing ability to procreate. The Humane Society in the United States calculated that one female and her offspring are capable of producing 420,000 in just seven years. Here's a real life example (BWD, March/April 92): In 1949, five cats were introduced to Marion Island in the Indian Ocean to control mice at a weather station. By 1975, there were 2,200 cats on the island, i.e., 40 per square mile, killing 600,000 sea birds (mostly prions and petrels) annually.

As I've said many times before, I like and admire cats--but not when they're out of control. Cat owners should not force bird watchers to lobby for unnecessary, restrictive laws, or worse, to take matters into their own hands in nasty ways, through the use of traps, local animal control officers, etc. Beside the potential harm to cats, such action makes for bad neighbors.

If you are not a cat owner and have been reading this article, with a smug smile on your face, allow me to point out that the people feeding birds also have a responsibility. We must insure that our feeders and birdbaths are located in such a way as to prevent cats from hiding in vegetation to ambush unsuspecting birds.

Thanks to Bird Watchers Digest for allowing us to reprint this article. For subscription information to BWD, call 1-800-879-2473.

Australian lawmaker seeks end to all cats

Reprinted from the Lincoln Journal Star, 1997

CANBERRA, Australia (AP)-

A lawmaker's call to wipe out all cats in Australia because they prey on wildlife raised howls of protest Friday from animal rights groups and the country's pet lovers.

Richard Evans wants Australia feline-free by 2020, and called this week for unleashing a fatal virus on wild cats that roam the Outback killing birds, native marsupials and other animals.

He also called for a law requiring pet cats to be neutered so they can't breed and eventually die out. Until then, a cat registry and cat curfews should be put in place.

"I am calling for the total eradication of cats in Australia" Evans told Parliament, adding that while cats may be playful and affectionate around their owners, they are killing machines when out on the prowl in suburbia. Evans blamed cats for the extinction of at least nine native species.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals agreed Friday that cats should be controlled, but called total eradication "outrageous and unnecessary."

Nancy Iredale of the Cat Protection Society called Evans' proposal laughable.

"I find it very hard to believe anybody would take him seriously. He'd have to fight us all the way," she said. "Cats give so much pleasure to people."

But some wildlife experts backed Evans' plan.

"I strongly support it," said Andrew Leys, of the New South Wales National parks and Wildlife Service. "But I can never see it happening. The solution is to manage the population rather than eradicate it."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- * Spay or neuter your cat before it can produce offspring.
- * Keep your cat indoors.
- * Never abandon cats outside. This practice is cruel and inhumane to both the cat and local wildlife. Take an unwanted cat to the animal shelter where it has a much better chance of being adopted.
- * Do not feed stray cats.
- * Support cat licensing laws, leash laws and higher licensing fees for unaltered cats.
- * Support humane removal of stray cats from neighborhoods and wildlife area.