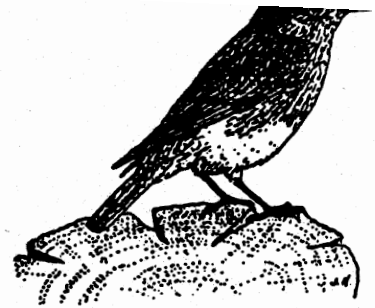


Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

2000 Fall Newsletter

Editor: Bill Read

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The AGM is set for Saturday March 17th, 2001 at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington Ontario. We have confirmed **Bernt Solymar**, chairperson of the Barn Owl Recovery Plan as our feature speaker. **James Cowan** who operates the Canadian Raptor Conservatory in Simcoe will bring along a live barn owl as part of the presentation. We will also continue with our members trail reports. If you have a report or information you would like to share, let me know and we can include you in this part of the meeting.

There were no reports of bluebirds found dead in nestboxes over the winter of 1999-2000. Don Wills from Caledonia, found evidence of roosting by EABL's in 39 of his nestboxes. The winter was not that cold enabling most overwintering EABL's to survive and return to breed in 2000. The spring and summer were extremely wet. Environment Canada reported that this past summer was the third wettest on record. Temperatures were cooler than the last few years, but were about average or slightly above average (based on long term averages). The temperatures over the spring and summer seemed cooler because we have experienced extremely hot summer weather the last four or five years. Most bluebirders have reported fewer fledged young but there were exceptions. Norm Shantz who has had an EABL trail for over 40 years reported his best year ever with 123 fledged young.

Overall, breeding success will be down. More pairs, but lowered breeding success in 2000.

Temp - Rainfall - Spring and Summer 2000

Month	Temperature		Rainfall	
	Mean	Normal*	Actual	Normal *
May 2000	13.8°C	12.5°C	145.3mm	76.3mm
June 2000	17.8°C	17.0°C	150 mm	79.5mm
July 2000	18.9°C	19.9°C	98 mm	90.4mm
August 2000	18.5°C	18.7°C	53 mm	93.3mm

**Normal based on long term 25 year average. Information gathered at Waterloo-Wellington Regional airport by Environment Canada.*

Temperatures in May and June were actually above the long term average, but rainfall in both months was almost double the normal value. This caused problems for bluebirds by decreasing insect activity and making it more difficult to find them especially during periods of extended rainfall.

The month of May had three periods of very cold weather which were preceded by heavy precipitation - May 14, 15, 16, 19 and 20 and May 25 and 26. This resulted in unusually high nestling mortality. Don Wills lost 61 young starting around May 23. The 23rd of May received 15.2mm of rain and 4.6 mm on the 24th.

On the 25th and 26th, the temperature dropped to a mean of 11.2°C and 11.4°C. Most first brood young were lost during this period. Second broods and later nestings were not as successful with some reports of EABL's giving up on later nestings.

Overall breeding success in 2000, will be around the long term average of 4.31 young per pair or slightly below.

Tree Swallows Found Dead in Boxes

In early spring, it is not unusual to find dead tree swallows in nestboxes. Tree swallows are by far the hardiest of all swallows and can endure long periods of extremely cold wet weather. During extremely cold weather, they gather in groups along rivers where they can scoop insects off the surface of the water. Most tree swallows die in boxes because they can't get out of a box. If dead, swallows are found in boxes with lots of fecal matter, it indicates they have been in there for some time and cannot get out of the box. It is not in most cases because they are physically too weak. Deeper boxes made out of plywood are very susceptible because the sides and inside front are so smooth, the tree swallow with its small claws cannot get a grip.

Make sure all boxes have grooves cut into the inside front of the box below the nest hole. This past year, on all new boxes, I spread wood glue on the inside front under the nest hole and then put sawdust and wood chips on top and pressed it down. This seems to have worked very well. Eastern bluebirds have no problem getting out of the boxes no matter how deep or smooth. There were very few reports of dead tree swallows found in boxes in 2000.

During this past year, **George Coker** has been selling his mudroom nestboxes and donating much of the proceeds to the OEBS. At the past AGM, George gave us \$266.00. This money will be used to purchase more Bird Watchers Digest books which we give to new OEBS members. Thanks again **George**, for your continued support of our society.

Christel Charlton has resigned as OEBS secretary. Christel has been secretary since 1994 and helped with the organization of the NABS meeting in 1996. Thanks again Christel for all your help over the years!

Overwintering Eastern Bluebirds in Ontario

Over the last four to five years, I have observed a continuing trend of more and more EABL's overwintering in the more southerly Carolinian areas of Southern Ontario. A total of 469 bluebirds were recorded on the ninety-ninth Christmas bird count (December 18, 1998 to January 3, 1999), 468 Eastern Bluebirds and 1 bluebird species.

They were recorded in twenty count areas from Kingston at the east end of Lake Ontario all the way to the St. Clair National Wildlife area, bordering Lake St. Clair. Most of these bluebirds were recorded in Carolinian areas close to lakes Ontario and Erie.

Eastern bluebirds are a regular overwintering species in the more southerly Carolinian areas of southern Ontario. If this trend toward warmer winters continues, I expect that Christmas bird count numbers of EABL's will continue to increase. Depending on the severity of our winters, most EABL's usually survive to breed the following spring. Their main food in Ontario is sumac supplemented by other fruits and winter active insects. Some insects and insect pupae are found within the red sumac fruit clusters.

The recently published Eastern Bluebird (The Birds of North America, No. 381) states that during mild winters, may remain farther north, sporadically north to southern Ontario. This publication was meant to replace the bent series published over 80 years ago.¹ As a reviewer, I am very disappointed in the final product especially as it relates to Ontario.

It needed more authors especially someone from the northern part of its range, either New York State, Minnesota or Ontario to more accurately describe Eastern Bluebird distribution in those areas.



¹ Arthur Cleveland Bent 1866-1954

Eastern Bluebirds Observed
 Ninety-ninth C.B.C.
 December 18, 1998 - January 3, 1999

Count Area	EABL Total
Blenheim	1
Brockville area	2
Cambridge	25
Cedar Creek	149
Dunrobin-Breckenridge, ON, PQ	6
Fisherville	30
Hamilton	26
Kingston	2
London	3
Long Point	8
Niagara Falls	52
Port Hope/Cobourg	10
Point Pelee	10
Presquile - P.P.	5
St. Catherines	45
St. Clair National Wildlife Area	2
St. Thomas	78
Strathroy	8
Toronto	1
Wallaceburg-ON-MI	5
Total	469

Bluebird sp 1

Eastern Bluebird Migration at Thunder Cape Bird Observatory 1991-1999

Eastern bluebirds migrating through Thunder Cape (located at the tip of Sibley Provincial Park, directly east of Thunder Bay) are migrating from areas to the north and northeast from above Lake Superior and probably from as far north as the Trans-Canada highway between Long Lac and Geraldton, east of Lake Nipigon.

Eastern bluebirds migrating west along the north shore of Lake Superior, east of Sibley Provincial Park would travel down to the tip of the peninsula and then fly across to the mainland via Pie Island. They would then continue flying southwest following the Lake Superior shoreline until they reached Minnesota.

Bluebirds not flying down the peninsula would continue following the Lake Superior shoreline until they reached Thunder Bay and eventually the end of Lake Superior where it meets Minnesota.

The biggest single day migration occurred on October 6, 1997 when 252 EABL's were counted. Audrey Heagy observed most flying off the point towards Pie Island. More bluebirds were observed in the fall, 984 to 254 in the spring.

What was interesting was the lateness of the migration with many birds migrating mid to late October, especially in 1999 with 84 on October 13, 57 on October 17, 58 on the 20th, 20 on the 23rd and 21 on the 26th of October. The lake tends to moderate temperatures along the shoreline below Thunder Bay.

Eastern Bluebird Migration Thunder Cape Bird Observatory - Thunder Bay, Ontario

Year	Fall		Spring	
	No. observed	Peak Date No. observed	No. observed	Peak Date No. observed
1991	90	Oct 10-27	NR	
1992	50	Oct 21-12	61	May 22-21
1993	11	Oct 16,24 - 2	19	Jun 12-12
1994	7	Aug 26 - 4	36	May 21 - 9
1995	87	Oct 14 - 62	14	Jun 8 - 6
1996	27	Oct 10-8	45	Jun 3 - 16
1997	266	Oct 6 - 252	6	Jun 2 - 3
1998	132	Oct 26 - 23	43	May 18-26
1999	314	Oct 13 - 84	30	Jun 8 - 5
Total	984		254	

Bluebirds migrating by Thunder Cape nest in forest fire burns, clear cuts and edge areas, north of Lake Superior in an area bordered by Lake Nipigon to the west, to roughly the Trans-Canada highway, near Longlac in the east and south to Lake Superior. Bluebirds migrating along the Lake Superior shoreline would travel down the two peninsulas separated by Black Bay until they arrive at the banding station at Thunder Cape.

Eastern bluebirds migrating by thunder cape are influenced by weather conditions. Strong NW winds tend to concentrate large numbers in a smaller geographical area making count numbers more reliable.

The recent publication *Birds of North America*, No. 381 Eastern Bluebird 1998 shows this entire area of about 50,000 square miles to be completely devoid of Eastern Bluebirds. An area from Rainy River west all the way around Lake Superior to Sault Ste. Marie. For a more accurate distribution of Eastern Bluebirds in the area above Lake Superior refer to the nest record card scheme ROM, Toronto Canada, the OEBS nestbox reports 1987-1999, the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas 1985 or the Eastern Field Guide by Roger Tory Peterson.

Thanks to Audrey Heagy for providing migration data from thunder cape and anecdotal information on flight direction.

Cowbird Parasitism

Fragmented woodlots in southern Ontario have enabled cowbirds to find the nests of many forest nesting species such as wood thrushes, veeries and wood warblers. I removed cowbird eggs from a veery's nest in the most remote part of Backus woods - one of the largest tracts of Carolinian forest left in Ontario.

This year was the first time that I have had cowbirds entering bluebird boxes. Three tree swallows and 1 eastern bluebird nest contained cowbird eggs. The tree swallow boxes were the Peterson design with the slotted hole. The bluebird nesting was in a P.V.C. plastic design also with an oval entrance. After removing the intruder's eggs, the tree swallows fledged, but the bluebird abandoned her 2nd brood clutch. Also Don Bull from Caledonia who uses all Peterson boxes with oval holes found early starlings were slipping through the entrances. He added panels with the 1½" entrance hole to solve this problem.

I would recommend that all boxes for bluebirds continue to use the standard 1½" round entrance to repel these avian intruders.

Roosting boxes for overwinterizing bluebirds

Don Wills

The above normal temperatures of the last few winters continued in 1999-2000 allowing many Eastern bluebirds in the southern part of the province to overwinter successfully. Both males and females were observed late in December along with an abundant supply of staghorn sumac. Thirty-nine nestboxes checked in late February contained various amounts of purple coloured manure from bluebirds eating sumac.

Only 3 Peterson boxes were used possibly due to the slanted floor, 2 Coker boxes contained large deposits and the standard NABS box with the flat floor were used by the rest.

Leaving boxes open over the winter can be a lifesaver for bluebirds as long as house sparrows are not found nearby. All roosting boxes were located near large sumac groves and some of these were the first boxes used in spring.

Weather - Bluebird Enemy No. 1

In the last 4 years, bluebird young and bluebird trail operators have suffered some miserable late May weather. 1997, 1999 and 2000 were killer years for my trail, while 1998's perfect May, early June produced record numbers.

The holiday weekend of May 23, 2000 started cold and wet with very few noticeable insects. I lost 61 young over that weekend, most at the 6-7 day old stage. After nest failure, most of these adults started again in other boxes having only one successful nesting for 2000. Over the summer, conditions were normal with second broods starting quickly for pairs that had lucky early first nestings.

However, in early August, I noticed that in my area, the population of grasshoppers and other insects which are vital to bluebirds were in short supply. During this time several second brood nests were abandoned killing another 11 nestings. It was also the first year I can remember when 2nd brood females abandoned nests as soon as the young hatched.

Overall, the weather in 2000 made monitoring eastern bluebirds a difficult, stressful adventure, one that I hope is not repeated.

P.S. One insect that had a good season was the wood tick. Starting early in May, I removed more than 300 ticks from myself and the family dog!

*Results for 2000 season Eastern Bluebird 340 nestboxes
105 pairs produced 532 fledglings.*

Box Pairing Shrinks the Eastern Bluebird Fledge from Associated Single Nest Boxes

By Joseph P. O'Halloran, Chair, BRAW Data Analysis Committee

Since 1996, BRAW has analyzed more than 17,000 box-years of data. In response to the annual findings of that study, each year more of its volunteer bluebird monitors turned away from box pairing; 57% of the state's East zone boxes were paired in 1996, and only 13% in 1999.

State-wide monitors were rewarded with about a doubling of the production of bluebirds per nestbox presented. The makeup of their bluebird/Tree Swallow crop improved from about 40% bluebirds to about 60% bluebirds. Also reflecting that transition, about 5500 bluebirds were fledged in 1996 and, from fewer boxes yet, more than 10,000 in 1998. More than 9,600 bluebirds were fledged in 1999. As discussed below, the benefits of the switch to single boxes were greatest in the East zone where the initial level of box pairing was highest (about 57%), and the initial level of bluebird production was lowest (fewer than 0.6 BBF/box).

BRAW's volunteer monitors are clearly enjoying their efforts much more - if only because their efforts are now so much more fruitful than when so many monitors were presenting paired boxes.

Wisconsin monitors tend to be dismayed by reports that some other bluebird associations are still clinging to the notion that box-pairing is better. The viewpoints appear to run the entire spectrum. A person in Wisconsin reported that "a paired box is a wasted box". A person from an almost completely paired state once e-mailed me, "A single box is a tree swallow box". Why the spectrum? Naturally, we would like to be able to reconcile the seemingly contradictory viewpoints. I think this study represents a step towards understanding the apparent dichotomy.

In 1995, in conferences with Drs. Whittingham and Dunn of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, BRAW learned that the professional ornithology literature showed that the "wannabe polygamous" male Tree Swallow will attempt to reserve a second nesting box within about 100 feet of his principal nest for the purpose of housing a second simultaneous mate. Thus that second box is not readily available for birds of other species. In 1996, BRAW embarked on the box-pairing studies, asking its monitors to report the data from singles and paired boxes separately. For the BRAW studies, a paired box was defined as any nesting box within 100 feet of another nesting box. Year after year, the data revealed that the crop from paired boxes mainly consisted of Tree Swallows, often at more than a two-to-one ratio of swallows to bluebirds.

A New Question

Recently, I considered data from the McHenry County (Illinois) Conservation District (MCCD) reporting on more than 400 boxes for the 1997 through 1999 seasons. I was puzzled by the reported higher bluebird productivity of their paired boxes compared to single boxes for each of those years. The reported results from 1,270 box-years of MCCD data appeared to be diametrically opposite the results expected in light of analysis of the more than 17,000 box-year BRAW data set.

When one examines the fine MCCD data, three things become clear: First, the reported boxes were mostly paired (about 57% paired) in all three years. Second, the bluebird fledge (BBF) numbers were relatively low from both single boxes and paired boxes. There were 68 BBF/100 singles in 1997, 105 in 1998 and 110 in 1999. There were 83 BBF/100 paired boxes in 1997, 165 in 1998 and 130 in 1999. Except for 1998, all these points appear in the low production range compared to the 212 average BBF/100 singles for both of Wisconsin's East and West zones in 1999 (about 13% paired). Third, for the three years, the percentage of bluebirds in the bluebird/Tree Swallow crop averaged about 34% compared to about 60% found in the current BRAW data.

So does the combined data really imply that paired boxes did better than singles? Obviously not. The highly paired Wisconsin East Zone and the MCCD production were both in the low range. Or does the combined data show that under highly paired conditions even production from the associated single boxes takes a nose-dive?

This is an interesting question that we haven't looked at before. The study upon which this report is based begins to explore this question. In the search for an answer to this question, it also became apparent that the "low bluebird-high Tree Swallow" character of the Wisconsin East Zone in 1996 was not a natural result of the environment. Rather, the East Zone bluebird production changed to a high production character as the percentage of paired boxes there dropped, and the per-singles-box bluebird production tripled.

Comparison Made in This Study

This report is based on a combination of the three years of MCCD data and the BRAW databases for the years 1996 through 1999, for the West and East Zones. All of these data sets include data for both single and paired boxes. For the present report, the average number of bluebirds fledged (BBF) from 100 single boxes for each Wisconsin Zone-year and for each MCCD - year was compared to the corresponding percentage of paired boxes in those "zone years". The MCCD data showed paired boxes somewhat superior to singles in each year. In no year, either for the Wisconsin West or East Zones, according to the BRAW data, was the productivity of the paired boxes superior to that from the corresponding singles.

(See the charts accompanying this article)

The data presented in both charts clearly support a positive answer to the question, i.e. at higher levels of box pairing, dramatically lower levels of even the singles box bluebird productivity were observed. The MCCD data showed, in their highly paired situation, that this very low productivity from singles boxes could be even lower than from the paired boxes there. Except for one point, all of both singles and paired boxes of the MCCD data are in the low production range.

The singles boxes of the Wisconsin East Zone have low productivity at pairing levels above about 36%. As stated above, all paired-box productivity in the BRAW zone-year data were even lower than that of the single boxes.

Both paired and singles boxes, presented in a context of many paired boxes, gave low bluebird production. Even if the production of single or paired boxes are better in highly-paired circumstances, this is not good trail management, since both gave low bluebird production.

The Conversion of the Wisconsin East Zone

The astonishing transformation of the Wisconsin East Zone from low bluebird production to high bluebird production within three years confirms the vast superiority of the singles-box trail management style. That transformation was accompanied by conversion from a highly box-paired context to a high singles-box content.

In the East Zone, the "low bluebird/high Tree Swallow" character was initially attributed to the environment and other factors. Until 1996, bluebird monitors there seemed resigned to producing mostly Tree Swallows. As the conversion progressed towards mostly single boxes in the East zone, it became a "high bluebird" zone. By 1999, the East Zone's level of box-pairing was about the same as the West Zone, and the bluebird productivity was also about the same. The perceived environmental distinction between these two zones has disappeared in regard to bluebird production. (Today, the reported Tree Swallow production in the East Zone remains about double that of the West Zone).

Conclusion

Examination of the BRAW pairing-study databases and the MCCD data confirms that high box-pairing levels (i.e. beginning at about 36% paired boxes) were associated with decreased bluebird production from even the associated single boxes.

Except for one data point, both singles and paired boxes were low bluebird producers in highly paired situations. In such highly-paired situations neither singles, nor

paired boxes were nearly as good as the very high production single boxes associated with low levels of box-pairing (below about 36% paired).

The transformation of the Wisconsin East Zone into high bluebird production demonstrates the superiority of the single box bluebird trail management style. The geography didn't change. The Tree Swallow pressure didn't change. Yet the East Zone singles-box bluebird productivity was about tripled as the trail management style changed to the use of single boxes.

The comments referred to in the background section, above, were both correct. The statement, "A paired box is a wasted box," was made by a person with all single boxes. The remark "A singles box is a Tree Swallow box", was made by a person living amid virtually all paired boxes. This study posits that as the percentage of paired boxes increases above about 36%, the bluebird productivity of even the associated single boxes decreases sharply.

I highly recommend the use of only single nesting boxes, i.e. nesting boxes space 100 yards apart or more, in both low and high Tree Swallow areas, and in both low and high bluebird areas.

In addition to the switch to single boxes, I believe the following other factors also may have contributed to Wisconsin's bluebird fledge success: more widespread use of the Rebar-Conduit posts for protection against raccoons (initially suggested, as far as we know, by Steve Gilbertson of Minnesota), more widespread use of the Peterson nesting box (designed by Dick Peterson of Minnesota) and other small-cavity nesting boxes, and decreased use of large volume, deep nesting box-types such as the Hill Lake and deep Open Top box types (highly favoured by Tree Swallows).

If the reader wishes more details about any of these features, please contact the author. (See Contact page). I wish to thank Don Bragg, Warren Close, and Carol McDaniel for their review and comment during the preparation of this article. I wish to thank the McHenry County (Illinois) Conservation District and especially Mr. Brad Woodson, Restoration Ecologist, and Mrs. Sue Hayden, Bluebird Coordinator for sharing their bluebird data with BRAW.

Warning regarding converting paired trails to singles trails: I feel obliged to repeat the warning given in previous years about the methods of converting a heavily-paired, Tree Swallow producing trail to a singles box trail. Conversion of such trails by simply plugging or removing one box from each pair will not only result in half the number of boxes presented, but may well produce a next crop of 100% Tree Swallows. When the author has been invited to inspect heavily paired trails for the purpose of proposing plans for conversion to singles, each of the trails observed was crowded with boxes as well; that is, even the pairs themselves were within close distances of each other. Please consider

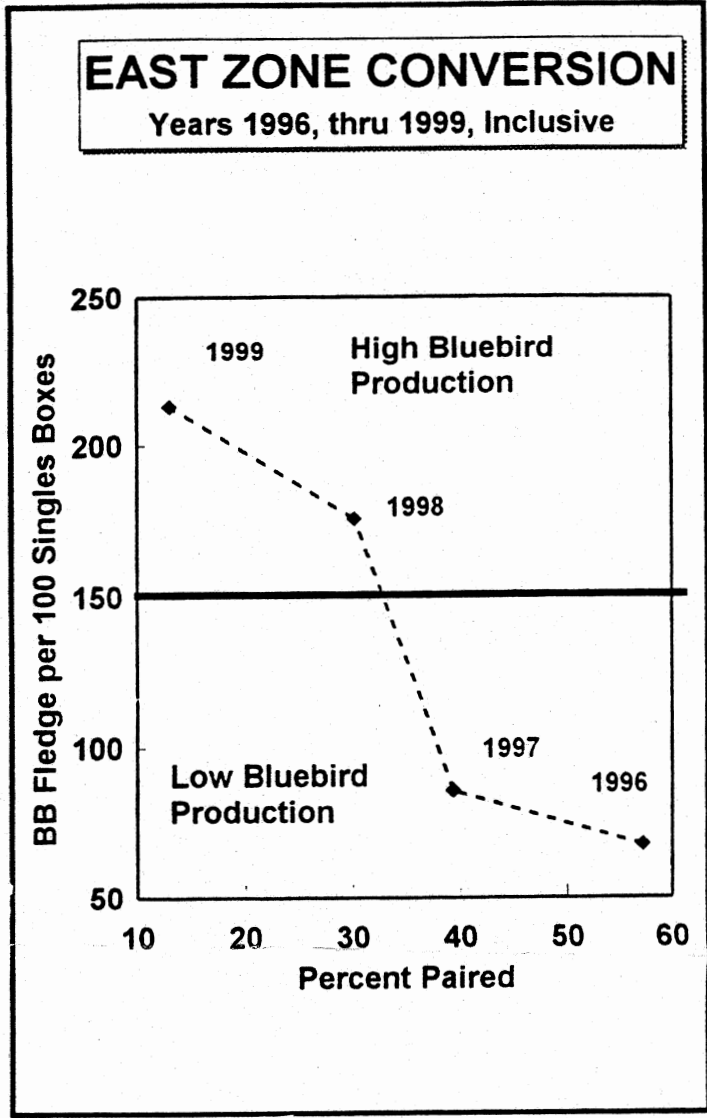
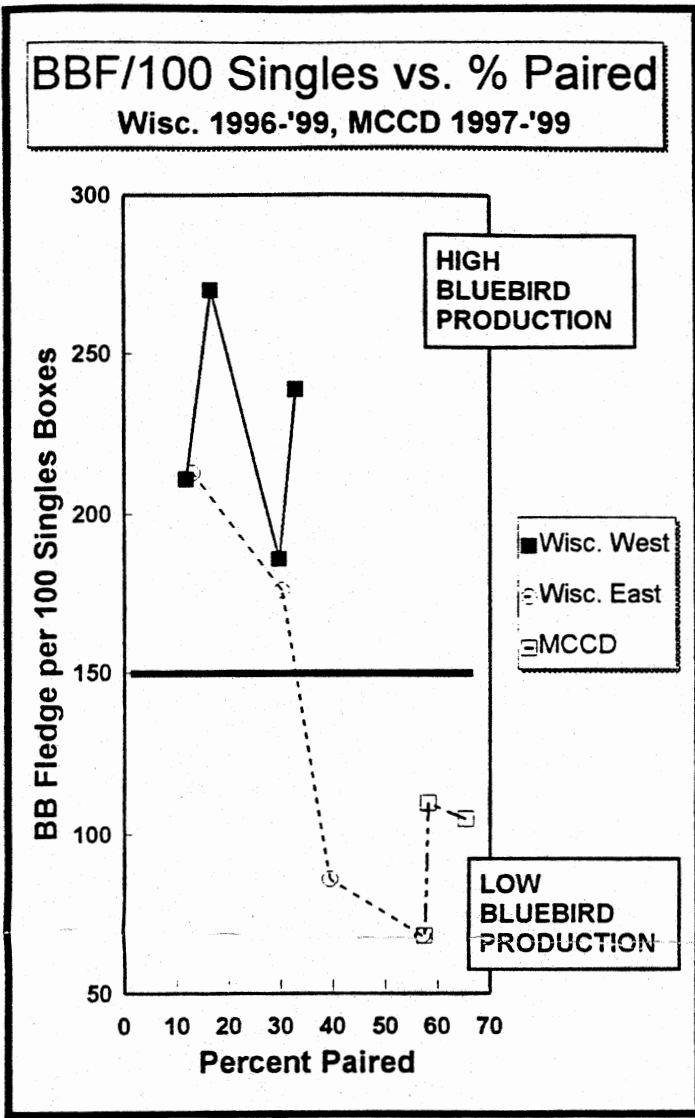
moving one box in each pair to a different site, and moving as many additional boxes as necessary, in order to relocate all boxes to more than a football field apart from each other. Good luck!

Notes on the Charts (next page)

In the chart titled "BBF/100 Singles Boxes vs. % Paired Boxes", the solid line represents Wisconsin West data, and the heavy broken line connecting open-square "points" represents the MCCD data. The points in each set of data are in sequence of increasing "% Paired" numbers. The left portion of this chart, (namely, the range of less than 36% paired boxes), shows high productivity from single boxes. Low single box productivity appears on the right portion of the Chart, at higher % paired levels (that is, above about 36% paired). If the reader were to lay a pencil across all the group of point-lines of the chart to approximate a trend, generally speaking, the overall trend slopes sharply downwardly from high single box productivity. But above about 36% paired boxes, the bluebird productivity for single boxes is all in a low range.

For example, the points representing both East and West Wisconsin zone-years with less than about 36% paired boxes averaged 216 bluebirds fledged per 100 single boxes. At points representing Wisconsin zone-years with greater than about 36% paired-boxes, the average is only 77 bluebirds fledged per 100 single boxes. (Note that this is only about a third). When the MCCD data, all three points of which are in the "more than 36% paired" range, are also included, the singles-box productivity in that low production range still averages only 87 BBF/100 single boxes.

The Chart titled "East Zone Conversion" using Wisconsin's East Zone data only, better illustrates the annual improvement of that zone (from right to left) as more monitors abandoned box-pairing. During the conversion, the 57% paired in 1996 (with 68 BBF/100 single boxes) dropped incrementally to about 13% paired in 1999 (with 213 BBF/100 single boxes). Viewing the points in the opposite direction, that is from left to right, in the same sequence of increasing % of paired boxes, as the level of % of paired boxes increases to above about 36% paired, the productivity of the corresponding singles boxes nose-dives into the low production range.



All Data Combined: R Squared = 0.710804

Wis. East Zone: R Squared = 0.87585

Wisconsin Data:

Below 36% paired, BBF/100 Singles avg 216
 Above 36% paired, BBF/100 Singles avg 77

The East Zone was "Low Bluebird, high Tree Swallow" in 1996. Then it was producing 68 bluebirds per 100 SINGLES boxes. But as the East Zone went from 57% paired in 1996 to about 13% paired in 1999, the bluebird fledge increased to 213 bluebirds per 100 SINGLES.

All data combined from above 36% paired, average BBF/100 Singles boxes is 87

It more than tripled! Now the East Zone is "high bluebird," like the West Zone. The geography is the same.

MCCD data is from McHenry County (IL) Conservation District
 At 678ARPA.WK4,B:ea409 O'Halloran

678ARPA.WK\$,B:eb260 O'Halloran

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