

THE FRIENDS OF THE BLUEBIRDS

NEWSLETTER

Number 4

April, 1997

RESULTS FOR 1996: The past year was one of those good news, bad news scenarios. The good news is that there were more nestings of Eastern bluebirds in 1996 than at any time since the Friends of the Bluebirds began keeping records. Following three consecutive disastrous years on the wintering grounds, numbers dropped to 10 nestings in 1978 and only gradually recovered. This past year we had 403 nestings of Eastern bluebirds. The bad news is that Mountain bluebird numbers dropped for the second year in a row. Probably the late wet springs have taken their toll on the Mountain bluebirds which usually arrive before the Easterns. Also, the late nesting start may have reduced the second nestings.

Reports were received from 52 individuals. In all, 2641 boxes on 68 lines were monitored and another ~960 boxes on 49 lines were cleaned and maintained. The results are given in Table 1. There were 755 Mountain bluebird, 403 Eastern bluebird, 182 unidentified bluebird and 2 possible cross-nestings totalling 1342 bluebird nestings. In addition 1215 Tree swallow, 154 Wren and 20 House sparrow nests were reported. As well as the usual mice evicted in the spring, there were 15 red and 2 flying squirrels. Occupancy rates were high; 91% of all boxes monitored were used, many of them more than once. **Congratulations one and all on a great job! You are really making a difference!**

BOXES: A very big **THANK YOU** to Jerry Wollman and the Newdale Colony for their donation of lots of scrap lumber. Thanks also to **Raymond Gladden** who has converted the lumber into boxes, and **Alex Robinson** who removed the boxes from Mr. Gladden's basement workshop and transported them to 8th Street. Boxes and extra lids are available by calling Barbara Robinson at 728-4029. Any further donations of wood or boxes would be much appreciated.

MAPS: Many thanks to all of you who provided maps. If you have not already submitted a map of your line, blank "grids" are available from Ann Smith (727-5102). We hope to have a new display map compiled before the next meeting.

VOLUNTEERS: We have a goodly number of volunteers looking after bluebird boxes BUT we can always use more. Each time we increase the number of boxes, we increase bluebird nestings. If factors other than the availability of nesting cavities were limiting the population, numbers would level off even if we increased the number of boxes. A few lines need new monitors or we can provide boxes for a new line. If you know of anyone who might be interested, take them out on your line and introduce them to bluebirds! Alternatively, have them get in touch with a member of the organizing committee.

BOX CHECKS: May we suggest that when you next check your boxes, you take a ruler, a rasp and an awl (or other short handled sharp pointed tool) with you. Check the diameter of your nest box holes (should be 1-9/16"/40mm) and enlarge them if necessary. Wood can swell in wet weather resulting in a smaller hole which Mountain bluebirds can't enter. Also check inside below the hole to make sure the surface is rough. A smooth surface can turn the box into a Tree swallow death trap.

A SPRING MEAL: In his Mar 29th *Globe & Mail* "Birds" column, Peter Whelan describes Bob Lutterbach's spring trip to the Qu'Appelle Valley to see bluebirds. Bob was wondering how these insect eaters survive with snow on the ground when a large insect, perhaps a boatman, hit his windshield. On mild March days boatmen emerge from open leads of the Qu'Appelle River and Peter wonders if this is why bluebirds near Regina are seen only near the river or its tributaries until the snow is gone.

TABLE 1. Nestings reported for the years 1981-1996. A nesting is defined as a nest in which at least one egg has been laid.

	NUMBER OF NESTINGS															
	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
BLUEBIRDS																
Mountain	727	662	*494	506	580	580	762	894	995	747	719	712	771	901	820	755
Eastern	43	72	87	54	100	168	258	276	354	207	191	164	167	337	265	403
Unidentified	12	7	18	6	7	24	83	66	51	97	49	73	84	220	170	182
X-nesting	1	1	1	0	3	2	1	2	2	6	2	3	0	5	4	2
Total	783	742	600	566	690	774	1104	1238	1402	1057	961	952	1022	1463	1259	1342
OTHERS																
Tree Swallow	680	661	872	1194	1100	1068	994	1094	994	726	691	841	923	1164	1100	1215
House Wren	54	62	84	74	79	59	57	46	85	91	122	94	192	211	184	154
House Sparrow	178	119	127	87	35	28	32	38	46	43	28	21	49	26	34	20
Total Boxes			2020	2123	1838	1899	2045	2382	2039	1678	1548	1843	2202	2691	2471	2641
Monitored Lines										44	34	36	58	68	61	68

*106 additional nests were found with frozen eggs

NOTES FROM THE REPORT

◆ In addition to his bluebird boxes, Richard Clarke has 12 duck boxes along the Assiniboine River at Treesbank. In 1996, wood ducks used two boxes while mergansers used six. Another box was a dump nest with a total of 40 eggs. They attempted to incubate the abandoned eggs, but, although some hatched, the young ducklings did not feed well and none survived.

◆ Kay & Cy Moir had a very late nesting of Easterns on their line near Hartney. When they checked Box 4708 on Sept. 12, they found four well-feathered young birds. These had gone when the box was checked again on Sept. 18.

◆ Rae & Barb Pettinger look after two lines, one at Shoal Lake, one at St.Lazare and are banding birds at both locations. They also tried adoptions when they found abandoned young. Two adoptions were of Mountain bluebirds; they added 1 and 2 birds to nests containing 5 and 4 young of about the same age – all 6 fledged in each nest. In the third case they added 3 young Tree swallows to a nest with 5 young – all 8 fledged.

◆ Bob Andrews had a mystery nest on his line. The nest itself consisted of sticks (like a Wren nest but lacking the small lined cup); the eggs were considerably larger than a wren egg, grayish with white spots. The first egg was noted May 21, later a second egg was added but no adult birds were seen. In July Tree swallows had 7 young in the nest. Any ideas??

◆ On his line NW of Russell, Jack Bryer found a female Mountain bluebird that had been banded by Jim Spear who also has a line near Russell. Another Mountain bluebird banded by Jim was found nesting SW of Calgary at Priddis, Alberta almost exactly three years after it was banded. The bird was found at the same latitude at which it was banded but well out of place in terms of longitude.

◆ Dave Stewart noted what he called a “lethal box” on his line. It was made of a synthetic particle board and Dave wondered if the material was to blame. He recorded 5 incidences of dead Tree swallows in 4 years. In two of the years, Wrens successfully raised young later in the season but no Tree swallows survived. The box has now been removed. Has anyone else had similar problems?

◆ In addition to 16 nestings of bluebirds in his boxes, Hugh Hornbeck of Swan River found 3 nestings in natural cavities along his route. This was his best year for bluebirds.

◆ Lloyd & Barb Stankey had an interesting line - they had exactly the same number of eastern and mountain bluebirds on their line along Hwy #357. Each species had 8 first and 6 second nestings. This is an increase in both species but particularly for Easterns as this has been mainly mountain bluebird territory. It would appear that the Easterns are moving into areas previously held by Mountain bluebirds. Perhaps we are going back to a more balanced ratio between the species. When John Lane first began to record bluebird nestings (1963-66), Eastern numbers ranged between 58% and 94% of Mountain numbers. In 1967 the Mountains began to increase at a much faster rate than Easterns as box numbers increased. Then in the mid-70's came three disastrous years in the East Coast wintering areas, and numbers of Easterns dropped drastically. The number of Tree Swallows relative to bluebirds has also dropped, although it is difficult to give precise figures as we record numbers of nestings and not numbers of nesting pairs.

ESKIMO CURLEWS: The September 1996 *Blue Jay* has an article by Bob Waldon describing Lloyd and Gwen Powell's possible sighting of the very rare Eskimo Curlew. The Powells were out checking their bluebird line south of Killarney when they spotted three shorebirds on the edge of a meltwater pond. Lloyd is an experienced birder and these were totally unlike anything he had seen before. They were able to observe the birds for about ½ an hour and make detailed notes. The best fit is with the Eskimo Curlew which is noted as “hypothetical” or “nearly extinct” in recent bird guides. An exciting day for the Powells.

BLUEBIRDS ON THE INTERNET: For those of you with access to the internet, there are several websites of interest. Jim McLochlin maintains a very informative site with information on bluebirds, bluebird predators/problems, box designs and links to other websites at: <http://users.aol.com/jimmcl/bbbox/index.htm> The North American Bluebird Society (NABS) home page is: <http://look.net/nabluebird>

EXCERPTS: BLUEBIRD NOTES '96 – BARB ROBINSON

Looking after a Bluebird line has many side benefits. This past summer I decided I would keep a record of sightings of species other than Bluebirds. The following are some of those sightings.

May 1-South Shilo. – I found many Mountain Bluebird nests started. As well I spotted Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Flicker, Tree Swallow, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Vesper Sparrow, Meadow Lark. In places the ground was carpeted with purple Crocuses, with here and there a few contrasting yellow dandelions.

May 2 - Camp Hughes. – Again many Mountain Bluebird nests were started. As in past years, some boxes had juniper berries inside and on top of the lids, leading me to believe that Bluebirds consume juniper berries or parts thereof, when they first return. A pair of Eastern bluebirds were spotted at Box 23, the female with grass in her beak. Sandhill Cranes were heard overhead. A yellow-bellied Sapsucker was found clinging to a post. I approached within four feet and took a picture. He never moved and I wondered if he was “tuckered out” after a long migration.

May 23-South Shilo. – While checking Box 188, I made my annual search for Low Townsendia and spotted 13 clumps with 1-4 blooms each. This is a rather rare species that grows in sandy, eroded soil. I'm always thrilled to see it.

June 20 - Camp Hughes. – Myriads of Dragonflies. Some blue flax blooming, strawberry blossoms and blue-eyed grass.

June 30- Camp Hughes. – Spotted a large patch of beautiful dark red roses. The perfume filled the air.

July 12- Camp Hughes. – Found a huge spider in Box 4151. On returning on August 5 found spider eggs and some hatched baby spiders. Lots of Bluebells, meadow-rue, tiger lilies, yarrow. A nice stand of crested wheat grass made a pretty picture. I had a good feed of strawberries on this trip. One drawback – the strawberries and poison ivy were competing for the same space. After many years of monitoring Bluebird lines, I still feel a thrill when I see Bluebirds. I think how very beautiful they are.

FEEDBACK: Any comments, items or suggestions for the newsletter would be much appreciated.