



Friends of the Bluebirds Newsletter

Summer 2016

Special 40th Anniversary Issue

Happy Birthday!

Friends of the Bluebirds reached a milestone this year! Our bluebird club is celebrating our fortieth birthday in 2016! The Friends of the Bluebirds club began with a single man, his name was John Lane. Lane grew up near Brandon, Manitoba and from a young age he had always been interested in natural history, especially birds. Lane began work with the Canadian Pacific Railway as a conductor in his early twenties. While traveling in this position he spent many hours observing Canada's natural habitat. One day while watching out from his side tracked train Lane noticed a pair of Tree Swallows struggling to establish a nest in the tubular sleeve of a telephone pole guy wire. The observation gave attest to the fact that natural nesting sites were getting hard to find. He realized that these, and other cavity nesting birds would need some help if they were to survive in the area. In 1935 Lane married Nora, of whom he shared a passion for birding with. In 1959 Lane looked back on his records which showed he had not seen a bluebird in thirty years. That same year Nora organized a Brandon Junior Birders club for kids and young adults to learn about different conservation efforts. John directed the clubs focus to bluebird and tree swallow nesting. The club built many a boxes and Lane took it upon himself to find a proper placement. In three years the club had made and placed seven hundred and forty nine nest boxes. After some time the club finally had success, in the spring of 1963 they had seen their first bluebird and that season their boxes produced thirty six Mountain Bluebird broods and thirty four Eastern Bluebird broods. Growth exploded after that, and the nestbox line stretched west to Broadview, Saskatchewan, south to the American border, and east to Macgregor and north to Ste. Rose du Lac. People joined their lines to his and today the entire complex extends over 1,000 miles in length, with an additional 1,500 miles of side road coverage. The trail consisted of 4 750 nest boxes. Lane meticulously kept records for all of his boxes, and banded tens of thousands of nestlings. Lane's death in 1975 was very sad and sudden, and in 1976 his family, friends and followers then created the "Friends of the Bluebirds" club in his honor. We as members today truly have him to thank for the return of these beloved birds.

Friends of the Bluebirds Logo Announcement

Some of you may have noticed the new graphic in the top left corner of this newsletter, if not, look there now! About little while ago the executives and I agreed on a logo project, that I would be at the head of. Our end result was the logo you see at this newsletter head. The photo feature is of a male Mountain Bluebird as well as a male Eastern Bluebird. The photos are both mine.

In the future we may have some products using this logo. One in the works currently is a vehicle sticker to benefit both you (club member) and our bluebird club.

I hope you enjoy our new logo, and in the future flaunt it with pride!

"Bird lovers everywhere will be grateful to him for bringing back the sight and song of the beautiful bluebird."

- Fred McGuiness
John Lane tribute: The Man who brought the bluebirds back

Look at the Difference We've Made!

John Lane brought the bluebirds back with his tremendous work, but now we, as Friends of the Bluebirds have helped in keeping them here. Without the Friends of the Bluebirds effort and dedication all of Lane's efforts would have been for not. To show the improvement I have included a table below, with varying years from 1980 to 2015. It compares the number of nest attempts (whether or not the nest was successful) over this period of time.

Species	1980	1981	1982	1983	1995	2000	2004	2010	2015
Mountain Bluebird	694	727	662	494*	820	466	185	245	199
Eastern Bluebird	41	43	72	87	265	349	193	618	446
Unknown Bluebird	6	12	7	18	170	212	92	143	90
Hybrid Bluebird	0	1	1	1	4	4	10	7	6
Tree Swallow	506	680	661	872	1100	1243	841	975	811
House Wren	40	54	62	84	184	103	89	69	57
House Sparrow	111	178	119	127	34	51	53	30-50	
Black-capped Chickadee	2	0	0	1	0			4	1
European Starling	2	2	0	2	0			2	

In the table above we see a huge increase in Eastern Bluebird nest attempts, in 1980 it was forty three attempts, in 2015 four hundred and forty six nest attempts. Mountain Bluebirds however are not as big a success story. As I look at this table I am saddened to see such a decline. Though one hundred and ninety nine is not a bad number in the scheme of things, but when you look at 1980's six hundred and ninety four nest attempts to 2015's one hundred and ninety nine attempts it's a little disheartening. I'm not sure what we can do for this special species, given we don't know what the problem is. Perhaps their range is changing or they are being overwhelmed by the competition. All we can do is keep up the tremendous effort. You can easily see the rise in hybrid bluebird nest attempts. Perhaps this is from the rise of occurrence for the bluebirds.

On a happier note you can see a rise in Tree Swallow attempts. This species is often dismissed as inconsequential when checking bluebird boxes but, the truth is they aren't exactly safe either. All insectivores have seen a decline recently, and they need our help as much as the bluebirds do. You can also see a large decline of House Sparrows, at least we don't have to worry about them taking over our lines!

From the Archives

Interesting stories from past newsletters

Peter Sawatzky found three dead young and three unhatched Mountain Bluebird eggs. No nest had been made, the eggs were layed on the bare floor. He also found a young Mountain Bluebird with a deformed bill. It had the beak of a crossbill, however it appeared to be healthy. (1980)

Mr. and Mrs. Jim Spear hosted one hundred and forty two Mountain Bluebird nests. One flock was so tame that they flew to Mrs. Spear and landed on her hand. (1980)

Earl Farley had a pair of Eastern Kingbirds nest in one of his boxes. A squirrel had enlarged the hole allow the birds to enter. The female laid three eggs but they did not hatch. (1982)

Two Rough-winged swallow nest inhabited bluebird boxes as well as two Eastern Kingbirds. (1994)

Hugh Hornbeck of Swan River found three bluebird nests in natural cavities (1996)

Barb and Ray Pettinger hosted a pair of Great-crested Flycatchers that successfully raised four young. This was the first ever nesting for this species on a bluebird line in Manitoba. (1998)

Bob and Isabelle Smith reported a White-breasted Nuthatch nesting on one of their boxes. (2001)

Bill Kosciely of Onanole tried many experimental boxes at varying sizes and heights. One of these boxes was nested in by a Boreal Owl. (2002) Bill also had issues with Ravens hunting fledglings as they were leaving the boxes. (2003)

Bridget & Arnold McPhaden reported a story with a happy ending. Two young bluebirds escaped from a box being checked and despite Bridget's best efforts she could retrieve only one. Until, that is, the father bluebird called the missing youngster back to the vicinity of the nest and recapture by Bridget. All's well that ends well! (2004)

Barb and Ray Pettinger found an albino Mountain Bluebird. (2008)



A Yard Full of Bluebirds

My favourite bluebirding moment would have to be when a flock of Eastern Bluebirds descended on my yard. The flock stayed for about a week, eating all of the berries off of my virginia creeper at the back door. The Eastern Bluebird is normally a relatively shy bird but they didn't seem to mind my presence at all as I watched them feast.

- **Edie Evans**



Bluebirds can be such Sweet Peas!

My favourite bluebird moment would be late in summer one year when six Mountain Bluebirds flew into the garden and landed on the pea fence, they sat there facing me as if they were saying "we're off now, thanks for the summer". They stayed there for a few minutes and then flew off.

- **Linda Boys**

Member's Memories

Forty years of memories worth sharing

Spring Time Salvation

I especially like getting out in the spring to check the boxes for mice, replace lids and do repairs. I enjoy collecting data on birds and this first visit to the line is the first good excuse to get out in the warm spring conditions and get started again. I start on the BB line much earlier than any of my other studies because the bluebirds are often back very early. I bet this year will see some early migrants.

- **Gord Hammell**



A Bluebirder Born

My best bluebirding memory has to be my very first day of running my bluebird line. I had just taken over a portion of a line and it was my first day out. The bluebirds were there early that year and not five minutes after we placed the lid on the first box, a male Mountain Bluebird was moving in and out of the box. I was absolutely awestruck. I didn't expect success so soon! Not thirty seconds later, in came a female Mountain Bluebird. But the bluebirds were not done with me yet. A little farther up the trail what do we see, but a pair of Eastern Bluebirds! Boy did the bluebirds do their job, they had me hooked!

- **Erica Alex**

A Special Sort of Neighbor

We have a bluebird line 25 miles south of Brandon. Last year we saw our 1st bluebird on March 15th, 2015, it was a beautiful male Eastern Bluebird & it nested in one of our boxes, mounted on a fence post on the east side of our yard. This pair fledged it's 5 fledglings & we cleaned out the nest. This same pair, then re-nested & later fledged another 5 fledglings from the same nest! So we were able to view all of this, right from our east bedroom windows, which are only 30 feet from the nest box. They provided us with a lot of beauty & entertainment all that summer.

Now today, March 12th we saw our 1st bluebird for 2016, it's a beautiful male, Eastern Bluebird & he is hanging around that same box, just 30 feet from our east bedroom window. This is our earliest sighting of a bluebird, ever. Could this be the same bluebird that arrived here last year on March 15th or maybe 1 of the 10 fledglings that fledged from that nest, last year? We are not sure, but it looks like we are going to have lots of beauty & entertainment from the bluebirds this year!

- Dan and Mitchie McIntyre



Member's Memories

**Forty years of
memories worth
sharing**

They're Like Part of the Family

My first bluebird memory starts long before I became a birder. When I was a young mom, I and the children were fortunate to be able to spend time with my parents at Crawford Park. (half mile west and half mile south of Camp Wanacumbac.) They had a hedge around two sides of their home and that hedge was alive with American goldfinches. There were little yellow puffs constantly darting in and out of the hedge.. A couple weeks prior to our arrival dad had placed a bluebird box on the hydro pole along the PR road. Were out in the yard, and All of a sudden amongst our flurry of yellow was a beautiful spot of blue, sitting on a branch. Of course the poor gold finches were quickly forgotten with our new found color. Was it really a bird or a paper wrapper blown in. "Oh their it goes:" -quick around to the front of the house. Dad was so pleased he had a visitor to his new bluebird box and we watched that box for two weeks straight. They were a busy pair of birds. That box had a pair of blue birds in it till the day Mom moved from the farm.

- Liz Shewchuk

The Bond of Bluebirds

One of my very first memories of bluebirds was a story my mother and grandfather told me. One day in the summer of 1979 my grandfather was working in the field. He found a female Eastern Bluebird, grounded and unable to fly, he gently picked her up and placed her in his hat and carried her home. He was greeted excitedly by my young mother, about seven or eight at the time, and my grandmother. Just by looking at her they could tell her wing was broken. So my grandfather carefully worked her broken bones back into place and set her up in a chick brooder to rest and re-cooperate. My grandmother boiled and crushed eggs to provide her with protein and replenish her strength. However they did not have to feed her for long. They kept her cage outside in the fresh air and one day out of the blue appeared a male Eastern Bluebird. He faithfully fed her every day, providing her with all of the nutrients she required. When she grew strong enough they assisted her in flying in the basement rec-room. By the time they were confident in her abilities it was fall. They released her to fly south and re-unite with her mate. This story has stuck with me ever since it was first time I heard the fantastical tale. I was amazed and touched by how her mate fed her every day, and every time I see a pair of bluebirds interacting with each other my mind drifts off to that pair, and the unbreakable bond they shared.



- **Photo and story by
Erica Alex**

The Adventures of Barb and Ray

Photos and stories by Barb and Ray Pettinger

One day Barb and I were doing our regular bluebird box check in June 2015 when we came across a box that had the nest all mixed up and disturbed. We have lost lots of birds and eggs due to this troublesome action. However as I was cleaning the box of debris I found two young birds at the bottom, probably two days old, cold and hungry. We took the two and warmed them up in our hands, the sun also assisted us in warming the young. We then fed them a few flies that we caught in the cab of the truck. A pair of needle nose pliers imitated their mother's beak and the nestlings readily accepted the food. We next needed to find a box with young of the same age, we had already checked many boxes and we knew there were no potential mothers so we carried on. Box after box, we just couldn't find a match. Finally we found a suitable mother, a Mountain Bluebird with two young about four days old. Perfect! There is always the question of acceptance and whether the mother will accept them or not, however we have tried this before and it seems to work quite well. On a later visit we found the Mountain Bluebirds had fledged, leaving the two fully feathered Easterns. They fledged a few days later. A happy ending for two young birds!

We have a bluebird line at the edge of a PFRA pasture and an unused road allowance near St. Lazare. During one of our first visits we spotted a moose along the fence where our boxes were located. We went about our business and she soon disappeared, and we never gave the event a second thought. Our routine of box checking involves a lunch at the exact spot we had seen Mrs. Moose. However on a subsequent trip we did not think about her. Lunch time rolled around and we set up camp in the sunshine of a beautiful day. As we settled into our chairs we heard a grunting in the bush beside us. Oh, oh! Where is mother? We quickly and quietly packed up and got back in the truck. As we did so who should we see wandering down the road but mamma moose. Cautiously she passed by not ten feet as we sat watching quietly taking photos. She disappeared in the trees where her calves and been, not to be seen again.



(left: mamma moose, right: orphaned bluebirds)

Handy Hints

Cold Weather Foodie

We as Manitoba bluebirders now that a snowstorm during nesting season can be detrimental to the bluebirds and their nestlings. It makes it hard for them to find food, but you can help. If cold, snowy weather swoops in in the middle of nesting think about providing your own food for them. Some food options are mealworms (if they are dried soaking them in water will make them more appealing), small bits of suet, and raisin pre-soaked in warm water. Place your food of choice in a shallow container, such as a margarine lid on the box roof or on a nearby fence post.

Sexing your nestlings

A way to collect more data when out in the field is by sexing the nestlings in your boxes. Telling male and female nestlings apart, can be difficult however with some practise it can become quite easy. When the young are older with tail and flight feathers you can tell their sex by looking at the blue hue on their tail and wing feathers. These feathers are bright blue on males and a duller, almost non-existent colour on females.

If you look at the picture to the left you'll see that the male nestling (the top bird) has brighter blue tail and wing feathers, while the female (the bottom bird) has duller tail feathers and almost colourless wings.

Photo by Erica Alex

Don't Open That Box!

When bluebird nestlings reach a certain age they are at risk of premature fledging. This occurs when the nestling are getting more restless and active but aren't quite ready of fledge yet. When a monitor opens the box the nestlings might flee, and leave the box. This could be detrimental to the birds and may ground them, leaving them vulnerable to predation. For Eastern Bluebirds the at risk age is twelve days old, and for Mountain Bluebirds this delicate time is fourteen days. Don't get me wrong, it's not a sure thing, they won't indefinitely fledge, but its better safe than sorry. If you are unsure of a brood's age try placing a hand or a small piece of wood over the hole to keep them from escaping that way.

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I wish everyone a successful bluebirding season!