

# BLUEBIRDS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD TRAILS CONSERVATION SOCIETY

## ORIENTATION ON JUNE FIRST

MBTCS President Jim Leitch will once again host a bluebird trail orientation on June 1. Participants should pre-register at our website, [bluebirdtrails.org](http://bluebirdtrails.org). After gathering at 9 a.m. at the Helen Schuler Nature Centre in Lethbridge, Jim will lead a carpool of participants to his trail in West Lethbridge. It is common at this time of year to see bluebird eggs, hatchlings, adult bluebirds and a variety of other flora and fauna. Numbers are limited to 12 at a time, to limit disturbance to wildlife and the private landowner who generously allows this tour. However, if more than that number are interested, Jim will hold additional tours. The event may be postponed if it is a rainy day because it is dangerous for bluebird hatchlings to get wet.



## FABULOUS FIFTY!

The Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. We invite you to visit our website at [bluebirdtrails.org](http://bluebirdtrails.org) to learn more about our history and current activities. In particular, a presentation by bluebird expert Myrna Pearman, which she provided at our annual meeting April 6, is full of information and photos.





MBTCS Treasurer Kathy Koenig prepared some delicious bluebird-themed delicacies for the annual general meeting April 6.



Lethbridge West MLA Shannon Phillips sent a congratulatory letter to the society in honour of the 50th anniversary. Left to right are executive members Ken Mackintosh, Joe Michielsen, Kathy Koenig, Jim Leitch, Barb Glen, Connie Chaplin and Rick Williams. Below, members gather at the annual general meeting at Helen Schuler Nature Centre.



# President’s report

By Jim Leitch

Spring has arrived, I think, but we certainly can't draw that conclusion if we use the weather as the determining factor. We know spring has arrived for sure when we hear about early sightings of the beautiful mountain bluebird. Some of those early sightings were in mid to late March this year. Most of our feathered friends arrive to begin their nesting process in April and early May.

This is the time of the year when we, as trail monitors, get our first look at our trails to see how the nest boxes fared over winter. With a sense of expectancy of nesting bluebirds to come, we clean out, repair or move boxes as needed for our eager guests.

Once again, I will host a half-day orientation session on my trail on a private farm in west Lethbridge on Saturday, June 1. This is open to anyone interested in having a trail or who simply wants to experience an active bluebird trail. Please connect with our website at

[bluebirdtrails.org](http://bluebirdtrails.org) to register. I limit the group to 12 but will take more groups if interest demands.

We had our 2023 AGM on April 6 and it was indeed a very special one. In addition to our usual business, we set aside time to celebrate  
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*President's report, continued*

our 50th anniversary as the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society in southern Alberta.

We were very excited to have the foremost bluebird expert in Alberta, gifted nature author and photographer Myrna Pearman, speak to our group. How appropriate for us to have Myrna, because she has done so much over the last 50 years to support and grow interest in the mountain bluebird and nature in general in Alberta and beyond.

Please visit our website to view our AGM and Myrna's excellent presentation and collection of extraordinary photographs.

There were 35 people at our AGM with another eight connected by Zoom. Since it was our 50th anniversary, we also wanted to acknowledge and recognize past executive members who helped lay a foundation for the society. In attendance were Ken Moore, past president and treasurer; Gerry Kylo, past trail master and director; and via Zoom Jan Warren, past secretary and director.

I also want to acknowledge past director and builder Les Sarsfield, who sadly passed away April 15 at the age of 93.

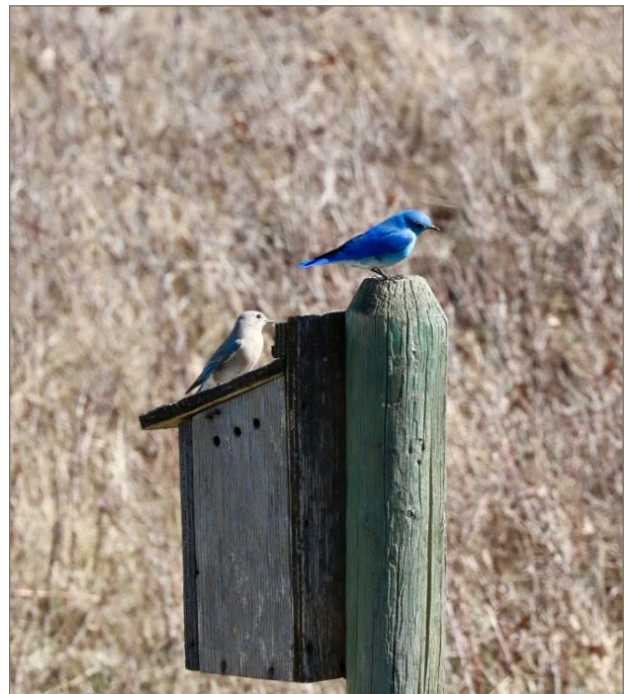
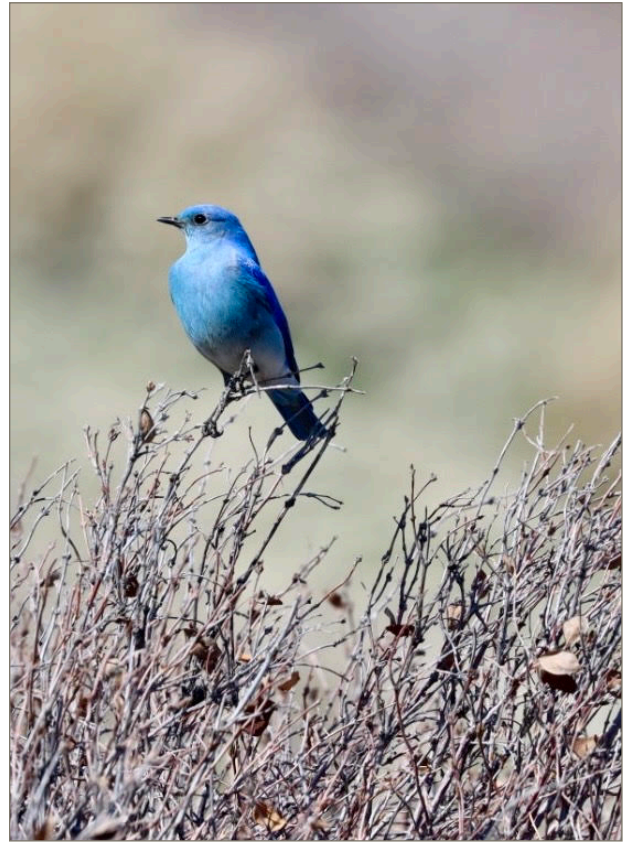
At our meeting, we passed our updated bylaws. Thanks to Connie Chaplin and Rick Williams for heading up that project. It is a job well done.

Special shout out also goes to Trail Master Steven Shumborski. He does so much to re-establish and give new life to abandoned trails as well as maintain existing trails.

Also a special thank you to our Webmaster and vice-president Curtis Goodman, who went above and beyond during this anniversary year to prepare a history of our society. Thank you, Curtis, for your expertise in promotion and media to ensure our 50th anniversary was a success.

The history of the MBTCS can be found on our website at [bluebirdtrails.org/history](http://bluebirdtrails.org/history).

A special thank you to all current executive members for your valued contributions to ensure the society thrives for the next 50 years and thanks again to all Trail Monitors for your faithful commitment to ensure the mountain bluebird is with us for years to come.



Photos above provided by Dave Annis, and our thanks to him for sending these. Photos for our website and newsletter are always welcome.

## Remembering Leslie Sarsfield

Leslie Irvine Sarsfield of Lethbridge passed away on Monday, April 15 at the age of 93. Leslie was survived by his wife of 70 years, Joyce (who has since passed away), and his children David and Jane (Ian) and special family friend Carla Schluchter.

Besides his family and cat Lucy, his true love was the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society, for which he donated countless hours to designing and building bluebird houses, studying, banding and reporting on the bluebird activities.

Gardening was another passion, focusing on the Patterson lilies and an immaculate lawn. The annual fishing trip to Beaver Mines and its many tall tales were also cherished.

He was active in many service clubs including the Lions Club, Kinsmen Club and Rotary Club. He served as the president of the Alberta Lung Association as well. Growing up in Drumheller Valley, Leslie, following in his father's footsteps, started out as a coal miner. Leslie then worked for Calgary Power for 42 years, and after retirement, worked as a courtesy driver for Mountview Dodge for many years.

At Leslie's request, there was no funeral service. In lieu of flowers, please donate to the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society or the charity of your choice. We loved him and will miss him.



## In search of the elusive LBB: a Sarsfield experience

By Jim Leitch

I inherited Les Sarsfield's trail in west Lethbridge back in the early 2010s. Les took me on his trail as a rookie back then for about a month to make sure that I was "doing things right" before he handed it over to me.

I was thankful after that month that I had earned his confidence so he could let it go. Les was a character for sure with a great sense of humour.

One day we were out monitoring his trail, and I had a question.

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Jim Leitch with a nest box featuring Les Sarsfield's nest box invention.

*Sarsfield, continued*

I asked him one day while we were out monitoring his trail, what that small prairie sparrow was called, thinking of course that he had a pretty good grasp of not only bluebirds but other birds as well.

With a wry smile on his face, he responded: "Oh, that is an LBB of course."

"A what?"

"An LBB. A little brown bird," he said, and then burst out laughing.

Les was a master at problem solving and a great innovator.

At one time he had a real problem with racoons on the boxes near the Oldman River and made it his goal to ensure those pesky racoons would not have another bluebird family for dinner.

He constructed cages over the hole and mounted galvanized steel roof peaks to discourage the racoons from sitting on the boxes and reaching in with their long arms and helping themselves.

Needless to say it worked and as the steward of Les's trail today, I have no racoons and the cages are still there on the boxes if required.

## Quest for best nest undertaken with zest

The following is an excerpt is from Cornell Lab's "All About Birds" regarding nest box placement.

*Males scout out possible nest cavities; females choose. Because studies have focused on nest boxes, ornithologists know relatively little about mountain bluebirds' preferences among natural nesting cavities.*

*Males show interest in all cavities within their territory, from knotholes to small rock fissures. Generally they prefer dry cavities*

*in open grassland within three feet of the ground, with entrances oriented away from approaching storms. They will also nest on cliffs and buildings.*

*Males sometimes enact a kind of symbolic nest-building — miming the act of bringing nesting material to the cavity, but actually carrying nothing, or else dropping their burdens en route.*

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*The female builds the insulated nest by herself, usually working hardest in the early morning. She entirely fills the cavity floor with coarse, dry grass stems and other vegetation, hollowing out a cup just large enough to allow her to cover her eggs snugly, with a maximum interior diameter of about two inches.*

*The cup is usually greater than two inches deep, and placed as far as possible from the*

*entrance hole. Cavity size determines the nest's exact external dimensions.*

*The female lines the cup with finer plant material, such as fine grass stems and narrow strips of soft bark, and also in some cases with wool or feathers. The whole process can take several days to more than a week.*

*Mountain bluebirds often reuse nest cavities within and between breeding seasons, and accumulating nesting material can pile up to the level of the entrance hole.*

## Is it time to renovate your nest boxes?

By Steven Shumborski  
Trail Master

Thank you to all monitors for caring for the bluebird nest boxes.

I am accepting requests for nest box renovation to be done after the 2024 nesting season. I have boxes to upgrade at Magrath Golf Club and I have a record of more than 1,400 boxes upgraded or replaced, just over half of the boxes in service.

Setting up a new trail can be done on private property for landowners who are enthusiastic about supporting bluebirds and providing more nesting sites. This is a way to get more boxes installed since almost every suitable road in southern Alberta already has nest boxes. There is also more native grassland going under cultivation for crops.

If you are unable to continue monitoring, let me know and I will check your boxes and renovate if I find fixed floors, then return the boxes to service with full roof and drop down floors.

Over the fall and winter I sent personal emails to most of the email addresses I have for monitors who did not report to Joe with their summary last fall. I was able to get responses from most monitors but no response from 25 per cent.

I am curious about what keeps people from replying. If anyone has ideas, please let me know. I would like to hear from every monitor at least once a year. I can be reached at [sshumborski@gmail.com](mailto:sshumborski@gmail.com).



Steven Shumborski took this photo while out on his many trail master travels. Seeing the beauty of nature is one of the perks of being both a trail master and a monitor.



## Bluebird news from our Sask. neighbours

**By Heliana de Souza-Wagner**

I stumbled upon your website last year while doing research about bluebirds. I thought I'd share some pictures I've taken of mountain bluebirds that occur in the Roche Percee area, in southeastern Saskatchewan.

Last year, in an effort to give these birds some extra help, my friends and I put up some extra boxes along the trail in Roche Percee and fixed some of the old boxes that were neglected and in need of repair.

My friend Chuck and I were recently out there for pictures and to inspect the houses and we spotted, for the first time in the five years of so we've been visiting that trail, a pair of Eastern bluebirds in the same trail and they had already started nest construction!



It is about a 25 minute drive from the hamlet of Hitchcock where I live, to Roche Percee, where the bluebird trail is.

Unfortunately, I've never spotted any bluebirds in my area (maybe not the elevation they like) but I do have other cavity birds that have been nesting in my yard for about 20 years now: purple martins, tree swallows, wrens, chickadees.

# Mountain Bluebird Trails Reported Results 2023

# of eggs reported - first brood		2069
# of fledged reported - first brood		1676
# of sterile eggs - first brood		128
# of dead nestlings - first brood		126
# of abandoned nestlings - 1st brood		72
# of eggs reported - second brood		393
# of fledged reported - 2nd brood		292
# of sterile eggs - second brood		46
# of dead nestlings - second brood		32
# of abandoned nestlings - 2nd brood		60
total # of bb eggs reported		2462
total # of fledged bb's reported		1968
# of sterile bb eggs		174
# of dead bb nestlings		158
# of MBT members with trails		105
# of MBT monitors		100
# of MBT members that maintain but don't monitor		5
# of boxes not reported	1038	
# of boxes reported		1662
total boxes	2700	
# of members that did not report		40
# of members that reported		65

Only 60% of MBT monitors have reported their 2023 nestbox results. It is not too late to report your results

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