

# Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society

## Field Notes from the Bluebird Parental Care Project

The first field season of the bluebird parental care project officially ended August 5<sup>th</sup> when we weighed, measured, and videotaped the 5 chicks at the LCC bluebird box for the last time. Of all the birds we kept tabs on this season, the pair nesting there was the only one to successfully raise two broods. Their first brood, like many others, got caught in the devastating June 8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> rainstorm. Unlike most of the other parents with chicks in the nest at the time, they managed to pull two of these five through the storm, just barely, but they did it.

In order to keep the close tabs on the birds necessary for the research project, I or my assistant were out every day checking every nest we could get to, rain, shine, or mosquitoes. The only things that prevented us from doing our rounds were mud and the occasional snowfall, and even then we still sometimes tried. Thank goodness for AMA.

In the end, we managed to get at least one videotape inside each of 19 nests. We're trying to figure out how parents decide which chick to feed at any given time. Previous research I have conducted suggests that their choice ought to be linked to the abundance of food available to them. The more parents have to give, the more equitably they should distribute it among their chicks.

It will be a while before the tapes are analyzed and we can say anything certain about bluebird feeding decisions, but we have already noted one interesting phenomenon – in at least some nests, when the chicks are very young the male doesn't directly feed them. Instead he passes the food along to the female and she gives it to the nestlings. If she isn't there when he arrives he actually waits for her to return. This is not a behavior I've ever heard of before, and I'm busy trying to find out if anyone else has.

A few other random observations we collected over the season:

- The first nestlings to hatch did so on June 5<sup>th</sup>. Their nest contained 7 white eggs and produced 7 pink and healthy chicks.
- Besides the two at the LCC, one other chick managed to survive the June rain. On a routine check a few days after the storm ended, we discovered one lone and very skinny nestling sitting on the floor of its box. Its dead siblings had been removed, as had all of the wet material that had been the nest cup, and its parents were busy fattening it up.
- Of course, the late May snow storm wasn't kind to the bluebirds either. No birds had chicks yet at that time, but about half of the incubating pairs abandoned their eggs and re-nested. Unfortunately, the ones who didn't were the ones who wound up with chicks that hatched just in time for the rain.
- At one box, we watched a pair defend their already established nest from a tree swallow that wanted to usurp it. This went on for days before the swallow finally gave up.
- We found another pair who had apparently killed and built their nest on top of a tree swallow and its nest.
- One female built a beautiful nest, and filled it with phantom eggs. Twice during the season she settled in to incubate, except that she wasn't incubating anything. She was very protective of her imaginary clutch, to the point of pecking us when we tried to get a peek beneath her.
- Once they reach the age where they can see, bluebird chicks like to look at your face and strenuously resist efforts to turn them the other way so that you can measure them more easily. When it's cold they also like to try to crawl up your jacket sleeve.

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*Many thanks to all who helped make this a successful field season, despite the weather, especially Dick Gwatkin, Andy Hurly, Liz Saunders, Les Sarsfield, Eleanor Thompson, and Gwen Tietz. Special thanks to Bob Harrison for all his time and knowledge, and of course, to my field assistant, Dallin Evanson.*

-Jennifer Davis

Don't  
Miss It!

Annual General  
Meeting ~ 2002

Saturday, October 26<sup>th</sup>  
1:30 – 4:30

*Fish & Game Association*  
*Corner of 9<sup>th</sup> Ave & 10 Street*  
*South*

*There will be a \$5 charge to cover the  
hall and refreshments*

**RSVP: October 22<sup>nd</sup>**  
**Harold: 377-2426**

Contacting MBT:

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# President's Message

Blue birding is similar to farming and ranching. Mother Nature annually provides us with a blessing or a burden. This year she played her trump card for the latter in these parts. Spring was late and cold with snow. The MOBL's arrived later than usual, held off nesting, waiting for warmer weather. They gave up and started only to have a wet snow dump of 12 inches. When the weather finally co-operated some nests were abandoned, some with eggs pushed down with new eggs laid on top. Nesting pair numbers were down on trails in my area. However, "bless 'em" they got down to business and started their broods. It will be interesting to hear from you, as to numbers, problems, and, it is to be hoped, success.

The rufus hummingbirds arrive at our cabin the middle of May without fail. Our feeders were up on the 15 and just in time. The morning of the 17 it was -6C and the sugar syrup had jelled. Ardell brought one in at a time to warm up and rotated the three feeders till the cold snap abated. We "pulled through" two nesting pairs.

During the late snowstorm we had 23 migratory and non-migratory species at the feeders. One unusual visitor to the humming bird feeders was a Tennessee Warbler. We watched the hummer and the warbler feeding on the same feeder simultaneously. We usually have two male ruffed grouse drumming each spring, but this was a silent spring.

The up side of this spring is that the pastures are a verdant green with blankets of wildflowers, displaying a different bloom wave every 7 to 10 days.

For my summer reading I have just finished a most interesting book by Jennifer Ackerman titled "Chance in the House of Fate - A Natural History of Heredity" published by Houghton Mifflin Company. The following are two quotes.

Page 46 – “Not long ago, the biologist Hubert Schwabl discovered that female songbirds bestow upon their eggs a surprise gift: a powerful dose of the hormone testosterone. The dose varies according to the order in which the eggs in a clutch are laid. Somehow, the songbird increases the amount of testosterone with the order of laying, stepping up the vigor and competitive abilities of younger nestlings, perhaps giving them an edge on their older siblings.”

Page 107 – “In many species of birds, no size or plumage differences distinguish the sexes, as far as we know. Only lately have ornithologists discovered a universal marker that betrays the gender of nearly all birds, a gene they can extract from a single molted feather.”

I would be remiss if I did not mention the 25th North American Bluebird Convention in Penticton in June. I have attended at least nine and none was better. The Southern Interior Bluebird Society arranged a superlative convention with 300 delegates, representing 27 US states and 4 provinces. Location, tours, speakers and displays were most enjoyable. If any of you do not belong to NABS I urge you to join.

The Mountain Bluebird Monitors Field Guide, written by Myrna Pearman has just been published. It is a must read for every blue birder and enthusiast. Complete with informative text, photos of daily nestling development in the box. Mountain Bluebird Trails is providing a copy to all our licensed banders at no cost. Others can purchase a copy for \$4 from Gwen or myself.



~ Ray Harris ~

## HOW TO STORE YOUR OPEN BANDS

-Dave Friebel

There are various ways of storing and carrying bands. Some open the bands on site, that is, they go to the box and see how many bands they need, go back to the vehicle and open that many, then go back and band.

A preferred way is to open the bands at home and carry them opened. This way a person is at the box the shortest time causing less stress to the birds. There are several ways to store bands. Some put them inside a drinking straw, but sometimes a band can turn a little bit inside the straw and become caught. Or, putting them on a metal rod seems to work well as they are reasonably easy to carry and get off the rod.

A 5/32" stainless steel acetylene-welding rod, available from any welding supply, does the trick nicely. They come in 36" lengths which can be cut into three 12" pieces. Each 12" piece will hold 50 bands neatly and safely. One end of the rod is threaded for about 1/4" and two 8/32 nuts are locked on and may never be taken off again. On the other end of the rod only a few threads are cut, just enough for one nut.

As bands are opened they are slipped on the rod in *descending* numerical order (that is #50 first and #1 last) with the numbers upright. Now they can be taken off the rod, as they are used, in the proper sequential order. With this method one can band six or seven nestlings in a timely manner.

I use three rods and on a big banding day, about 120 bands can be put on nestlings in about 3 1/2 to 4 hours including driving time.

MBT has several of these rods on hand that are available for banders to use. Call Gwen at 553-2780 to arrange to get yours for the 2003-banding season.

*Happy Banding!*



## Counting birds' nest for conservation

-Michael Henry

Canada's first nest records scheme began in British Columbia in 1955. Regional coordinator Wayne Campbell says over 500,000 nest records have been amassed for the province since then – a volunteer effort he estimates is worth well over \$10 million. That volume of long-term data is necessary in order for scientists to identify factors that may be affecting bird populations.

We know, for example, that many Canadian songbird populations are declining every year, but where does the blame lie? In the case of tree swallow, Campbell notes that a preliminary analysis of nest records suggests that climate change has fooled them into nesting too early.

"I'm getting reports that there are a lot of dead nestlings in nest boxes; and what we've determined over the long term is that tree swallows are now nesting about 10-12 days earlier than they were 15 years ago. The unfortunate thing is that the insects aren't appearing at the same time, so the swallows are hatching, there's no food for them, and they're dying," he explains.

It is long-term records like these, rather than observations of a wide variety of nesting species that are crucial in helping researchers determine the factors that may be affecting bird populations. Indeed, the nests of many birds, particularly those that nest high in trees or in alpine areas, are rarely found. George Peck, co-founder of the Royal Ontario Museum's nest records scheme, points out that approximately half of the 2 million nest records collected (and salvaged from historical sources) in Ontario since 1957 come from about 10 species.

That fact makes it easy for volunteers to participate in nest record schemes, no matter where they live. Whether you monitor the behavior of peregrine falcons nesting on city buildings, keep full season records of the American robin in your back yard, or travel down remote northern rivers to record the abundance of belted kingfishers, you can make a contribution to bird conservation efforts.

If you would like to take part in a nest records scheme, visit the Bird Studies Canada Web site at [www.bsc-eoc.org/national/nestrecords.html](http://www.bsc-eoc.org/national/nestrecords.html) to find out how to get in touch with the co-coordinator in your region.

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## MAPS ~ Waterton Park 2002

-Gwen Tietz

Upon receipt of a spring newsletter of the Lethbridge Naturalist Society I circulated word that the Conservation Biologist, Cyndi Smith, in Waterton was looking for volunteers to assist with the use of mist nets for migratory bird research. A few of the MBT banders were most fortunate to be placed on the "helpers" list for the project.

This entailed a test of one's devotion, as the nets were to be up by sunrise. Now, the drive from my humble abode is over an hour so that meant I was on the highways at 3:30 am to reach the site on time. I made it all three times just in the nick of time as the troop set out to set up the nets.

I might suggest that if one ever can get an opportunity to assist on such a project jump, as it is fascinating indeed. The company was the most informative and the chance to see several "cuties" up close was not to be missed. I know there was one dandy Wilson Warbler that I will not forget for some time.

I am a nature nut to the core but my final day on site was not for the faint at heart. On our return from checking the nets we came upon 3 bears, a cinnamon cub, cinnamon female and a black male. Our fearless leader, Cyndi, continued to chew on her tuna sandwich while my heart lodged in my throat. I will admit that at least I had a fearless Dave Friebel and John Hochstadt to keep me calm on the exterior. (Sorry guys, I do not have nerves of steel.)

Although the three bears were probably the most magnificent animal I had ever witnessed in the wild, I do not want to see them that close again. (The female at one point was close enough to see pupils.) Thank goodness the bears were calm as I was a shaking leaf underneath.

Thanks to a brave bunch for getting me through! Whew! That was too close for me!

# "Awards Corner" ...



## 2002 Blue Feather Award Recipient

Significant continued contributions to the ongoing efforts of an individual are recognized annually with the "Blue Feather Award". All of us with the southern Alberta Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society should offer our congratulations to our president Ray Harris. Ray has been a long time supporter and

### A few notes on the NABS 25th Anniversary Conference

-Carol Porter

Weather was hot so we appreciated being right on Okanagan Lake with its many walkways. Penticton temp. was 94 and probably 100 at the Osoyoos Desert Centre where we did some walking on a day-long field trip. The last stop was the "cool" winery. Participants were from 4 provinces and 27 states. Over 300 were registered, hotel was great, food was super. Conference was well organized and all ran smoothly. (One of the organizers said he had 5 1/2 hours sleep in three days. He looked it too!)

Speakers were very good and spoke on a variety of topics: birds, area history, rehabilitating birds of prey, wolves, and the white bears of Princess Royal Island (they are really white black bears).



*Ray Harris of Fort MacLeod, former NABS president and president of the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society of which we are all members, received the prestigious John and Nora Lane Award for his long-term contributions in promoting bluebirds.*

Myrna Pearman of the Ellis Bird Farm near Lacombe, a renowned bluebird expert, has just written a wonderful new 58 page booklet called "Mountain Bluebird -Trail Monitoring Guide". If anyone would like to buy a copy contact (403)553-2780 or (403)553-2646. It is well illustrated and will tell you everything you always wanted to know about monitoring bluebirds. The cover picture is worth the price of the book! If you want more information go to <http://www.fanweb.ca/book/bluebird.htm> or contact us at MBT.

## And.....

**Our very own Harold Janecke was recently awarded a Certificate of Appreciation by the Order of the Big Horn for his outstanding contributions to the conservation of Alberta Fish & Wildlife. This award is sponsored by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development Board. Way to go Harold!**

*Harold was also a recipient of the "Blue Feather Award" in 2001.*

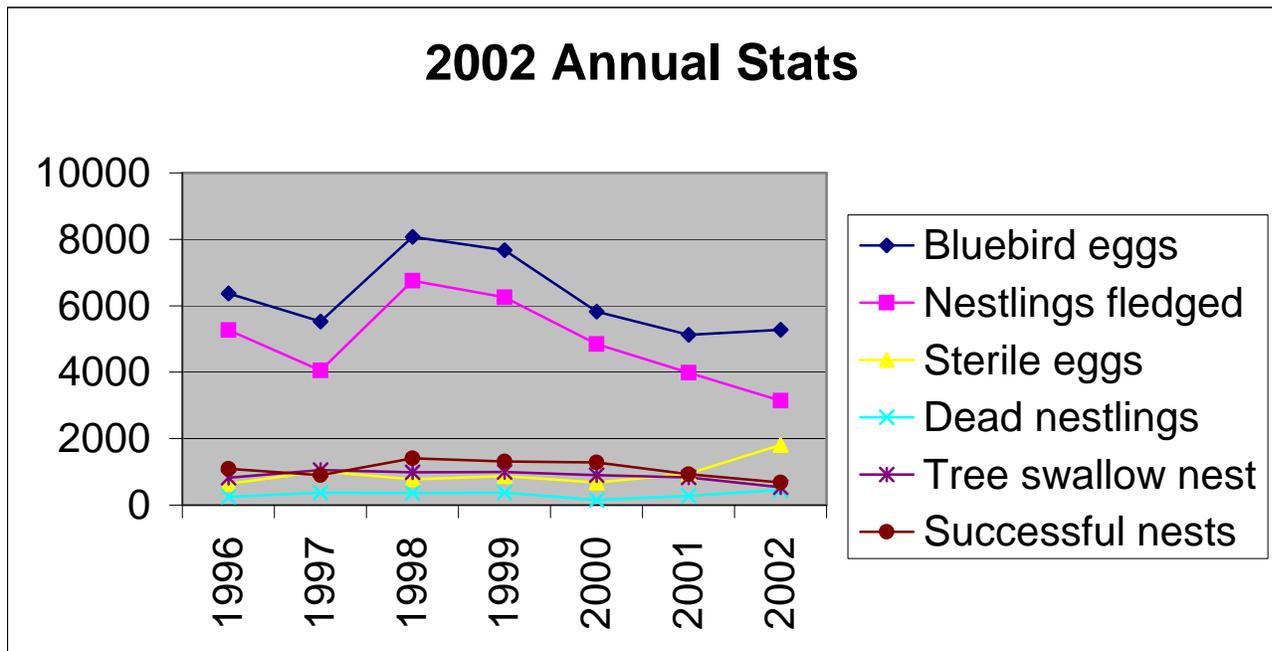
# Summing Up 2002

G Tietz

Winter of 2002 was calm and mild for the most part, memory recalls wearing t-shirts in mid February. Than Mother Nature choose to show her full fury in late spring with two very fierce storms in May and June. Most of us witnessed the start of what would be the first brood only to have these eggs abandoned. Reports were not good for not only the bluebirds but also many returning migratory birds. Food was sparse and the deep snow caused starvation and deaths due to the prolonged cold periods.

But, true to form the bluebird came back in full strength in many areas reported as the second brood proved to be almost as productive as what a first would have been. Uniquely, the weather caused a synchronized lying of the first (second) brood and the task of banding for most of us occurred in a shorter period. I banded 169 on a single day; several other banders experienced the same.

Then, poof, the bluebirds seemed to vanish in mid-August from many areas. Where they went will always be a mystery. But, upon returning home to our humble abode on the evening of Monday, September 23<sup>rd</sup> I made an emergency call to Mr. Janecke to ask for assistance. The mighty bluebird had invaded our yard in a flock of 30 in number and set about to pick the gravel from my eyes trough, bugs from our vehicle grills and hover over the recently cultivated field behind the house. Many thanks to whomever fostered the members of this flock as they were a welcome sight for us. **Good work to all the volunteers of affiliates and ours.** May the bluebird grace our skies for many years to come.



	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Boxes available	3312	3327	3200	3219	2897	2603	2085
Successful nests	1096	901	1407	1315	1282	932	676
Bluebird eggs	6371	5527	8073	7673	5828	5128	5274
Sterile eggs	641	1014	775	872	679	947	1810
Dead nestlings	251	376	362	375	158	279	462
Nestlings fledged	5267	4050	6755	6257	4847	3980	3145
Adults banded	125	113	159	169	116	154	148
Nestlings banded	2687	2128	3985	3733	3167	2726	2148
Recoveries	77	61	98	96	97	87	73
Tree swallow nests	823	1053	984	994	905	832	535
Wren nests	55	53	41	45	27	28	14
Sparrow nests	33	29	32	50	17	23	30
Stolen/vandalized	29	38	34	31	37	29	35

**Special Note:** These statistics are incomplete due to select banders not submitting the mandatory reports at time of publication.

**Notes from Wild Bird Crossings**  
~ CVC Farms ~  
**SUNFLOWER BIRD GARDENS**



**Trail Management Update**

Make sure and attend the Annual General Meeting on Saturday October 26! On display we will have the aerial images provided to use with the assistance of Richard Hardin of Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada. To date we have catalogued over 21 trails of approximately 1300 boxes.

MBT cannot thank Richard enough for his time and assistance on this project. Eventually, the co-ordinates catalogued under this project will be used to report band usage down to the seconds versus the 10-minute block definition.

Many of us though that this would be a lengthy project but the help of banders, volunteers to assist banders has made the project reach the half way mark in only one year. If your trail was mapped than we will provide you will a copy of the image for your records-just ask us for a copy.

**Excellent combined efforts!**  
**Thanks for your help!**

A well-planned bird garden should contain an island, border or several clusters of sunflowers. As they grow, heap up the soil around the stalks to keep them upright. Give plants an occasional shot of fertilizer and water with dirty dishwater (it works).

Hummingbirds will always be the first to find your sunflowers. Other birds, like the yellow warbler will come in search of the numerous insects that are exploring the flower heads. The common flicker will gather ants from the stalks and the rose-breasted grosbeak will be the first to crack open the ripe seeds. The american goldfinches will bring their young to teach them how to husk the seeds. The downy woodpecker and chickadees that return to stay for the winter will be the next in line to enjoy the ripe seeds. If there is a good, long lasting crop of seeds, many birds will stay to feast throughout the winter.

*So, don't be hasty to "clean-up" those sunflowers from your gardens this fall.*

Located on Highway 3, 13.5 kms east of Pincher Station  
and 27.7 west of Fort Macleod

***Open year round ~ 10 am-8 pm***



**Permit Suspension & Revocations**

*The Canadian Bird Bander's Training Manual, Environment Canada*

**Section 4, 4.7** "Permits may be suspended or revoked if the bander's qualifications or conduct is questioned, investigated and subsequently found to be in breach of that deemed acceptable by the Banding Office. This includes exceeding authorizations specified on banding permits, ***neglecting to submit banding schedules*** or the mistreatment of birds."

***MBT continues to have an issue with the remittance of the mandatory reports required.*** The requirements were simplified starting in 2002 with the deletion of the traditional banding schedule form. All bands issued came with a new form that required only three pieces of information be supplied by the bander; male/female/nestling, box number and date the band was used. Subsequently the "Annual Summary of Stats" is also required to compile the annual reports supplied to the members as a whole. Finally, recoveries require a location and a date for remittance to the Banding Office. ***The deadline of September 1<sup>st</sup> must be met by all members.***

***Unfortunately, two sub-permits will be revoked in 2002, as the simplified forms were not returned. Notification will be sent to the applicable persons shortly. This course of action will remove the risk of loosing the remaining sub-permits the other members of the Society hold.***