

Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society

Volume Five ~ Fall 2005

Editor: G Tietz

Wicked Weather!

Just when you thought that Spring Storms could not be any more unusual...Mother Nature threw yet another hard ball this year. Seems to me that the bluebirds have to struggle each year for the rights of survival. Southern Alberta managed to sail through the early spring without the traditional heavy wet dumps of the last few years. But then the skies let loose with a whole new repertoire of splendor.

I hear it was a storm to behold, and did I get calls on my cell phone! You see, I was in Bozeman, Montana enjoying the company of our southern affiliates for the annual Mountain Bluebird Trails Inc of Montana conference. Just thought I could escape for a few days but on no.....my holiday trailer was about to float down river. Thanks to the assistance of Dan & Roxanne Mackenzie (fellow bluebirders) my trailer was moved to high ground just in time.

Sadly, many nestling bluebirds did not fair as well. Take special note in the amount of dead nestlings this year in the annual stats – **1230!** And I thought the snows in the spring were a problem, think again. I know I have some major box replacement and repairs this fall. I don't know about your trails but some of my boxes are getting up there in age and the rain that comes down in a "sideways" fashion can cause major problem for the nestlings. Now I know why we have to point the boxes the way we do! Upon returning to the area we had to spend many an hour fashioning dry nests for the survivors. I knew my knitting skills would come in use some time!

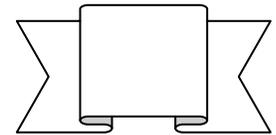
It's funny, going through the stats sheets it appears that the Police Lake, Cypress Hills and farther north areas did not fair quite as badly as the south western area against the Rockies. Let's all hope that we don't have a repeat of this storm any time soon.

In any event, my trip to Bozeman was spectacular. It never ceases to amaze me how receptive and hospitable the group in Montana is. I do know one thing though; I am a complete wash up with their "South Dakota Auction". One must start the bid very low for the desired item, and pay that amount. Next bidder pays his declared bid, and so on. So, they collect cash for many small bids but with the likes of me they collect a lot indeed! Seems I have not learned the art of the "final bid" techniques. Too fast to raise the hand I guess. Yes, they do like me attending indeed! All in the name of charity I guess.

Wrapping up another year of statistics for the group has proven interesting for me. I am on my year nine of compiling the data. Truly glad that it is on the computer as it is a lot of work to do it manually as I did at the on set. Thank you to all of you that remitted your data on time, I do appreciate it greatly. And to the 2 people that have yet to send data in, the rest of us **will not** receive permits or bands for next year thanks to your efforts. I apologize ahead of time to the rest of the group as it appears this will be the last year I will be doing this as it will not be required.

Cheers!

G Tietz



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

October 29th, 2005

2:00 P.M.

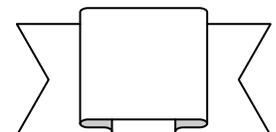
Fish & Game Bldg

9 Ave South

Lethbridge, AB

RSVP – October 24th

553-2646



President's Message

The following has been gleaned from "A BLESSING OF TOADS" by Sharon Lovejoy

. . . from an 1885 United States Bureau Biological Survey study of the eating habits of wild birds. The stomach contents of sixty thousand birds of over 400 species were examined and analyzed.

Scarlet tanagers were observed in the field eating thirty-five gypsy moth caterpillars per minute. Nashville warblers ate three tent caterpillars per minute and a whopping eighty-nine plant lice were consumed by one tiny yellowthroat.

When the stomach contents of a rose breasted grosbeak were examined, scientists found the remains of fourteen potato bugs. A downy woodpecker had consumed eighteen codling moth larvae, a red-winged blackbird twenty-eight cutworms, a robin 270 larvae of March flies and a flicker 5000 ants. (There could be possibly two messages in this item).

I have 5 Bluebird Crossing signs left. They are metal, 12x12 inches. Yellow background with an attractive male Mountain Bluebird. MBT is selling them for \$15 each. Phone 553-2646.

A tip for banders, from the Bird Banding Office, Canadian Wildlife Memo No. 84. . . . Bands received from suppliers are randomly inspected, however due to the volume of bands used in North America it is impossible to inspect all bands before issuing them to banders. Therefore band inspection is the responsibility of banders. Examine each string of bands to ensure correct sizing. Before placing on the bird examine for correct placement of numerals, sequencing and readability. Ensure there are no sharp edges or corners that could injure the bird. In the event that poor quality of bands are received, please notify (MBT band co-coordinator Gwen Tietz, who will then notify) the BBO so that it can be followed up with the manufacturer.

N.B. to MBT banders - Please follow band instructions in the info package sent out each spring. It is imperative to keep meticulous records, band in sequence, not from top of string and then from bottom, yes we have had it happen. Return your banding records and unused bands on date requested. Gwen has a full time accounting and computer service business. There is a short time window to compile and send banding data to BBO. MBT is fortunate to have a dedicated person as band co-coordinator.

As I write this column in late February, night temperatures dip to -13c or lower. In April, temperatures will be +13c or so, think winter. Birds have been known to survive shockingly cold temperatures. The record for a snowy owl, is -62c, according to McGill University biologist David Bird, author of "The Bird Almanac" (2004).

In winter birds can live contentedly in the city. Thanks to backyard feeders, more small birds are making their winter homes there, and larger birds of prey follow suit.

As for surviving frigid temperatures, whether in urban or rural areas, birds are well constructed to adapt. They don't have sweat glands, so there is no moisture to freeze their feet to metal perches. They eat high energy food, fluff out their feathers to trap heated air, find sheltered spots to roost, lower their body temperature and heart rate at night, and reduce blood flow to their extremities. Since their veins and arteries lie next to one another, there is heat transference from outgoing veins to the incoming arteries. Toronto Star, 2005-02-20

~Ray Harris ~

Erv Davis, Volunteer of the Year

Erv Davis , 78, a member and past president of the Mountain Bluebirds Inc of Montana was honored with the US National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer of the Year Award for his continued volunteer work at the National Bison Range in Montana for over 35 years.

The award was presented in Washington, DC, in January by the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Erv is a long time member and past Director of NABS, and monitors a bluebird nestbox trail at the Bison Range as well as his other nestbox trails. He leads tours at the visitors centre, does bluebird and duck banding and other extensive volunteer work at the Bison Range.

The award was well deserved and we should be pleased that Erv was honored. Erv taught high school English and worked on the Government for 30 years before he retired in 1983. It is volunteers like Erv that truly deserve thanks from us all.

Another Member we have Lost

Recently, and quite suddenly the Mountain Bluebird Society of Southern Alberta lost another long time member. Gordon Nelson was a member for many years and was an active bander until his untimely passing in September, 2005.

Ours deepest sympathies go out to the family members and our thoughts are with you. Few of us were lucky enough to meet Gordon but those of us that did remember him fondly.

The Board
MBT of Southern Alberta



There's a Bluebird in my Front Yard

It's deep into winter now, I long for the bluebirds to return...I look out my window and count the days, the winter winds blow and the ice grows thicker. All the leaves are covered in snow; the only life I can rely on is the occasional chickadee, flicker and even a great horned owl if I am lucky. The days grow short and the winds howl with winter rage. And even thicker the ice becomes.

But wait, a Chinook blows in and gives me hope for the longer days coming ahead. These winds I do not mind, it brings a breath of warm air to my outdoor haven in the country. The snow begins to melt and the ice turns to slush, yet as darkness falls so does the mercury once again.

Just as I grow stir crazy with the endless days cooped up in my abode, the weather breaks again. This time it is now just a Chinook, it is finally Spring! Spring on the lakes brings the jingle of broken ice flows, music to my ears.

In the distance I hear the honk of the geese on the return. In remoteness I chance upon trumpeter swans, oh the beautiful sound of the wind through their wings as they fly over my head, so low to the ground. Over the hill I trudge to an even more remote wetlands just beginning to break with the first crack of warm sunshine. What do I see? Sandhill cranes! Back to mate and settle in solitude to raise their young. My heart sings as they dance their courtship in the wild. This event one must see at least once in a lifetime.

Slowly the days pass and the heat is still sparse, my patience grow short as I wait. First came the dark eyed juncos, white crowned sparrows and the lot. Late February and then early March....someone in Montana sends me the word. They are sighted and almost upon us! Truly spring can begin!

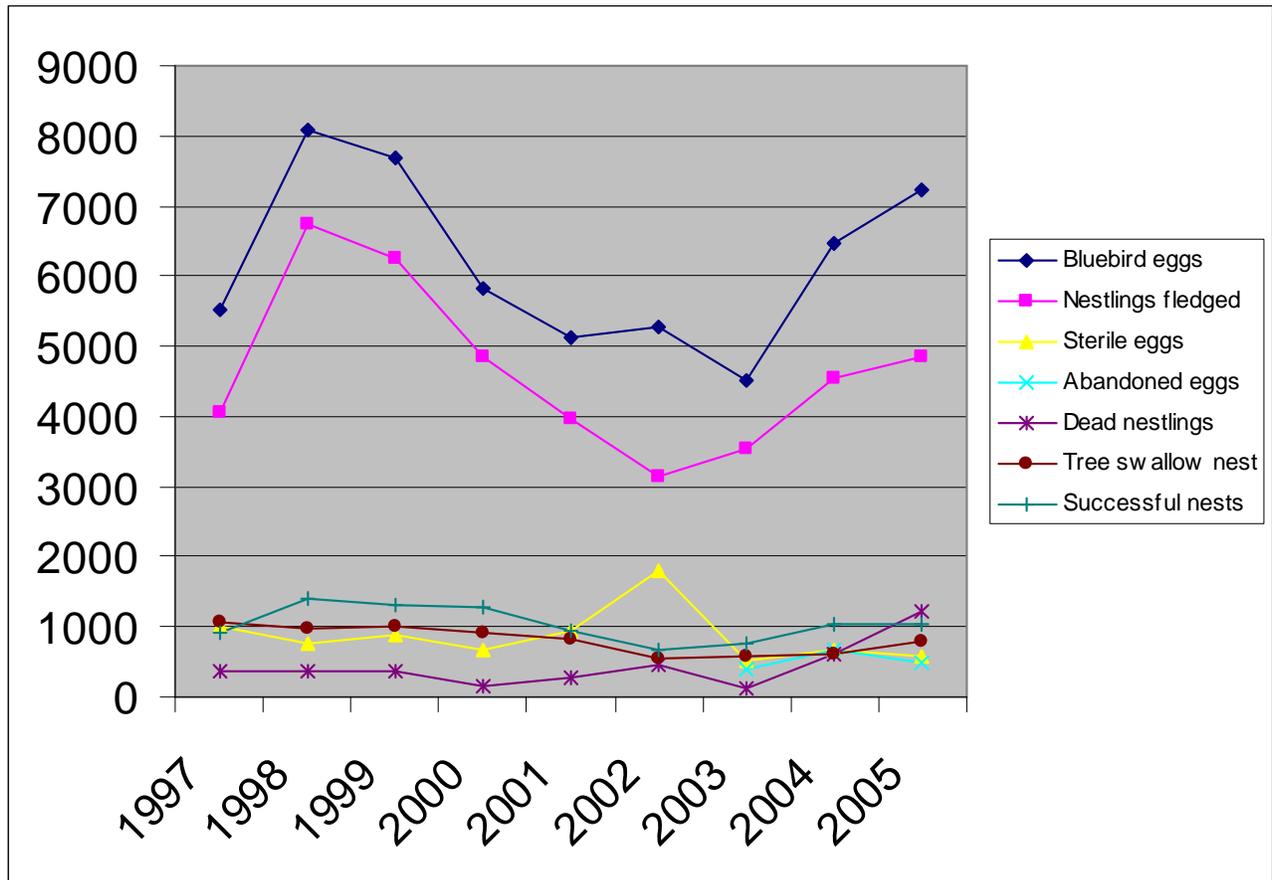
I wait and early one day as the dawn barely cracks the horizon. First comes he and scouts out the box, he sings (or peers) for a mate. It seems to no avail, and then I see another. She's here! And he rejoices and stuffs the box full. It seems I'm to be a grandma once again, how lucky is that? I stay clear and cause no bother in fear they vacate my front yard. No reason to fear, stay they did and raise a brood for me to brag.

My bluebirds have returned each year, now this is 5, and how much better can life get? Except this year for the neighbor's cat, next year I will solve that one too. I have 2 cats, they stay indoors. I value my bluebirds and do not wish to cause the heartbreak I see with each death.

So, think of the birds in the sky and their struggle to survive. Think global, act local and all will profit.

G Tietz

	1992	1994	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Boxes available	3108	3307	3312	3327	3200	3219	2897	2603	2085	2088	2062	2162
Successful nests	1549	1025	1096	901	1407	1315	1282	932	676	756	1026	1024
Bluebird eggs	10568	5598	6371	5527	8073	7673	5828	5128	5274	4522	6453	7237
Sterile eggs	1241	804	641	1014	775	872	679	947	1810	530	660	579
Abandoned eggs										405	684	503
Dead nestlings			251	376	362	375	158	279	462	132	596	1230
Nestlings fledged	8232	4296	5267	4050	6755	6257	4847	3980	3145	3529	4545	4866
Adults banded	176	95	125	113	159	169	116	154	148	116	106	154
Nestlings banded	5701	2523	2687	2128	3985	3733	3167	2726	2148	2507	2701	2583
Recoveries	142	87	77	61	98	96	97	87	73	62	96	103
Tree swallow nests	583	644	823	1053	984	994	905	832	535	568	623	788
Wren nests	100	81	55	53	41	45	27	28	14	20	18	49
Sparrow nests			33	29	32	50	17	23	30	34	36	39
Stolen/vandalized			29	38	34	31	37	29	35	32	57	52
Used twice	811	230	221	206	531	243	346	248	149	492	302	428



“Incomplete!”

As of the date the above statistics were published for this newsletter, **October 9th**, **FB & JM** had not remitted their banding data. The deadline is September 1st!!! Hence, **MBT** can **NOT** renew the permits **for 2006**. Unless this data is received MBT will no longer be continuing with banding. *It is a shame isn't it???*

Controlling Blowfly Larvae

Blowfly larvae are a common problem with nestlings in many areas in Southern Alberta. They are parasite to the nestlings as they attach themselves to the nestlings to feed periodically.

In some years the infestation can be worse than others. If nestlings are weak due to a lack of food, such as this year in the bad weather, the blowfly larva can prove fatal to the nestlings.

The best way to monitor for blowfly larva is to check the nesting material at the bottom of the nest box, when you are able. If you see an abundant number of larvae in the nest material, you can readily replace the old nest with a new nest of dried grass clippings.

I know I am hasty at cleaning out my boxes in the fall, but a little know piece of trivia is there is a wasp that lays its larvae in the old nesting material. In the spring the wasp larvae hatch and dine on the nasty blowfly larvae. So, in areas where you constantly have problems with blowfly you may want to leave old nest material alone until the following year to test if this assists with the blowflies.

"Major Mice Issues"

I have just returned from cleaning out over 120 boxes on my usual rounds in the fall. Never have I had such a problem with mice in my boxes.

Please be careful handling the materials in the boxes when mice are present! Deer mice, that cute fellow with white ear linings and belly, are the guilty carriers of Hanta Virus. I have a partner on my trails, Roxanne Mackenzie, and she continually reminds me not to "breathe" when I am cleaning out these boxes. (She abandons me and stands a few feet away as Mickey and her are not good friends.)

You should carry a face mask and a mild bleach solution to spray into these boxes. Sometimes I leave the lids off as even I am a chicken and refuse to evict large families of squirming critters....yuck! When in doubt, leave the lid off and return at a later time to empty the box and disinfect the box.

Or alternately, bring someone just a little braver than yourself to complete the task!

Gwen Tietz

"You're not a cavity nester!"



"Bluebird Trivia"

The Mountain Bluebird inhabits western North America. Its breeding range extends from the Yukon Territory, south through British Columbia east of the Coast Range. It breeds as far east as eastern Manitoba.

The Mountain Bluebird is the most migratory bluebird species, although many individuals simply move locally to southern elevations.

When elevated perches are not available, the Mountain Bluebird, unlike other members of the thrush family, will obtain most of its food by hovering in the air a metre or more above the ground in a hawk-like manner, as it searches the earth below for food.

Resource = <http://www.hww.ca>

Distribution of the Mountain Bluebird

- Breeding range
- Year-round range
- Wintering range



There's a bluebird on my fencepost

NATURE NOTES:

BY HILAH SIMMONS

I've been watching for spring migrants this early spring, and finally the brilliant male mountain bluebird showed up on the 3rd of April. Folks in Pincher Creek have been seeing spring migrants for weeks; our foothills ones are coming through at last.

Bluebirds, along

with robins, are members of the thrush family, Turdidae. These birds are all beloved as spring harbingers, cheery singers, and devourers of mountain insects, worms, and other invertebrates. Our all-blue mountain bluebird *Sialia currucoides* has a range that overlaps with the red-breasted eastern and western bluebirds. Mountain

bluebirds are usually found at higher elevations, but also enjoy open prairies, especially in winter. As with other thrushes, the male is more brilliantly colored than the female, which is brownish grey with paler blue wings. They breed from B.C. over to Manitoba, and have even been seen in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. In winter they migrate south to the U.S. and Mexico.

One of the mountain bluebirds' special behaviors is called ground sailing, in which they fly down from a perch and briefly light on the ground to snatch a prey. They also hover and catch flying insects in mid-air. When they're migrating and in winter they also eat small fruits, though insects are their main diet.

Bluebirds are cavity nesters, and build a nest of grass

and shredded bark in a tree or other cavity, when a nest box isn't provided by one of our Mountain Bluebird Trail members. These folks have been a very important factor in the flourishing of the mountain bluebirds since 1974, when 5 birds fledged from nest boxes, until last year, when 16,120 fledglings were counted in the many boxes which are distributed in western provinces and states. Males usually come north first to establish their territories. The females do most of the work of nest-building. Five to seven greenish blue eggs are incubated for about two weeks, and the hatchlings usually fledge between two and three weeks after they've hatched.

If you're interested in building a mountain (or other) bluebird house, the floor should be 13 x 13 centimeters, the

ceiling should be 23 centimeters high, the entrance hole exactly 4 centimeters in diameter and located 18 centimeters above the floor. A removable roof allows you to clean the box each spring and even check throughout the season to find out what's been going on in there. The boxes should be about 100 meters apart, but I suggest you put two back to back so that if a tree swallow or other bird uses one, the bluebird will take the second.

They won't nest next to another of the same species, but tree swallows and bluebirds don't mind being neighbors. Mount the boxes 1 to 2 meters high on a post or tree, and if cats or predators are a

problem you can mount stovepipe or metal around the posts. I had to move our nest boxes quite a distance from the house for safety!

It's a good idea to keep direct sun out of the entrance hole. Bluebirds love forest edges or open places.

Whether or not

you decide to host bluebird family hope you'll enjoy seeing them and hearing their lovely warble this spring and summer.

