



# Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society

Volume Three ~ Spring 2003  
Editor: G Tietz

## The West Nile Virus Facts

West Nile virus is attracting much media attention as it moves across North America. Although most of the coverage has focused on humans, West Nile virus primarily affects birds. The virus has been found in a wide range of bird species with some species appearing very susceptible while others show little or no clinical effects. Members of the corvid family (e.g. crows, magpies, ravens, and jays) are particularly susceptible. In 1999, crow populations in the New York area declined by 90% in the first few months of the virus outbreak. Some sparrow species can tolerate the virus and may serve as "reservoirs". Eastern bluebirds have tested positive for West Nile virus, but I am not aware of any cases in mountain bluebirds to date.

West Nile virus is primarily transmitted by mosquitoes. The virus lives and replicates in the nervous tissue of birds and circulates in their blood where it is picked up by biting mosquitoes. The virus also replicates in the mosquito and is transferred to a new individual when the mosquito feeds again. West Nile virus replicates very easily in birds of the corvid family, helping to explain why mortality is so high in this group. For example, American crows often die within 6-8 days of being bitten by an infected mosquito.

West Nile virus has difficulty replicating in mammals making infection rare and helping prevent transmission. Less than 1% of people exposed to West Nile virus show symptoms and deaths are very rare. The very young, the elderly and those with immune deficiencies are most susceptible. Horses can also become infected, but deaths are very rare. There is no evidence that West Nile virus can be spread directly between mammals nor is there evidence that people can contract West Nile virus by handling infected birds. However, it is always recommended to use gloves when handling dead birds.

West Nile virus occurs in many areas of the world, particularly Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It was first detected in North America in 1999 in New York state and has since spread across much of the US and southern Canada. By mid-summer 2002, it had spread westward across all states east of the Rocky Mountains and into Saskatchewan. West Nile virus has not been reported in Alberta, but its arrival is anticipated this year. Migratory birds currently over wintering in areas where the virus is known to occur, such as Texas, Louisiana and southern California, may become infected with the virus and bring it to Alberta when they return in the spring.

As part of the Calgary Zoo's continuing investigation into mortality of mountain bluebirds in Alberta, we are examining any bluebirds that are found dead. Our veterinary staff will determine cause of death and test for diseases and parasites, including West Nile virus. If you find a dead bluebird, please place the bird in a sealed plastic bag (remember to wear gloves), freeze it immediately and contact Les Sarsfield (403-328-5957) to arrange for pickup. We greatly appreciate your assistance in this component of our study. The Calgary Zoo is an established partner in disease monitoring ensuring the report of diseases to the appropriate organizations.

**Tian Dalgleish**  
Conservation Research Program Coordinator  
Calgary Zoo

(Additional information on West Nile Virus: page 7)



## Thanks

After many discussions and searching we have finally come up with the NEW logo! Have a peek at the artwork in the top left hand corner! Longtime member and bander Marjorie Friebel graciously pulled out her easel and came up with this lovely picture. At the January 12, 2003 the board of Directors was presented with several originals to choose from and the vote was unanimous. Thank you Marjorie!

## Contacting MBT:

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Lethbridge, AB T1J-3Z1  
(403)553-2780  
email: [soabmbt@telusplanet.net](mailto:soabmbt@telusplanet.net)

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## President's Message

The months extending from October to March for the Bluebirder is a hiatus. One usually uses this time to prepare for the active months, April to September. Are the nestboxes in good repair? Do some need replacing, repairing or re-positioning? Your executive also has been active, planning for the coming year. Tasks such as annual meeting venue, date, time; nestbox construction for monitor requests, GPS readings for remaining trails and newsletter items have been agenda items.

I wonder if members who keep feeders for wintering birds have noticed a decline in numbers and species. I usually feed about 250-300 lb. Of black sunflower seeds each winter. This season only about 75 lb. Regulars at the feeders this winter are Black Capped and Mountain Chickadees, a pair of Downies and a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers. Missing so far this winter were White and Red Breasted Nuthatches, Redpolls, Grosbeaks-Pine, Evening and Rosy Breasted, these frequent our feeders every year. Was it the late spring snowstorms last May, which delayed or aborted nestlings? Was it our mild winter with a plethora of available food?

May I share with you one of the most interesting books I have read in a long time? The title is "The Snow Geese", by William Fiennes, the author, a Brit, while attending university, suffered a bout of depression, was hospitalized for a lengthy period and also had several unrelated surgeries. He convalesced at his parent's home in the English countryside. His father was an avid, knowledgeable bird enthusiast, which influenced William greatly. During his recovery period he read a book of his father's, "The Snow Goose", by Paul Gallico, written in 1941. This book fired a desire to learn more about Snow Geese, which in turn formed a desire for a quest to come to North America. He would follow the Snow Geese migration from their southern wintering grounds in Texas to the northern nesting grounds, Foxe Peninsula, Baffin Island, Canada.

His flight from England took him to Eagle Lake, south of Austin, Texas. As the Snow Geese began to move north with the warming weather, he followed them, as they made periodic stops to replenish body reserve, or continuing migratory flights. He used rented autos, was given rides from strangers who became friends as they wished to assist his odyssey. He also relied on Greyhound buses, commercial aircraft, trains and small charter flights, eventually bringing him to his destination, Foxe Peninsula, the summer migration nesting grounds of the Snow Geese.

The thread that binds his journey is the astute observations he makes at each stop. He not only describes Snow Geese but also gives observations of other birds, mammals, flora and geography. He blends knowledge of a scientific field observer with additions of a dedicated amateur. He has a wonderful ability to meet, observe and describe the people who befriend him. They take him to the field observation sites and feeding areas. They invite him to share their homes during his stops.

His poignant insights provide a wonderful read. This book is a "Keeper".



**Ray Harris**

## Excerpts from the January 12, 2003 Minutes

- Search is on for new board members!
- MBT logo was voted and approved ~ appear in Spring/03 newsletter
- Deadline for newsletter article submission: March 15-Spring, August 15/Fall editions
- Website slated to be ready by Summer/2003~invite all members to view~email [soabmbt@telusplanet.net](mailto:soabmbt@telusplanet.net) for a link
- Trail Management Project/GPS coordinates continue to be collected~final trail of bander to be done in 2003 and than the monitors will be contacted. A monitor's trail is done on an optional basis.
- Annual General Meeting 2002 was a great success
- Annual General Meeting 2003 set for October 26, 2003 @ Fish & Game Clubhouse in Lethbridge
- Funds are needed for a new computer and printer~Corporate sponsorship is being pursued
- Pursuing a repeat donation of lumber from prior contributor
- D Friebel was approved to spend funds for nails, linseed oil, etc for box building of 2003
- Discussion to the possibility of alternating conferences between regions and affiliates-investigation to follow meeting
- Discussion to the possibility of having shirts, coats or vest made on a request basis-investigation to follow meeting

**Next meeting of the Board of Directors is Sunday May 4, 2003, 2:00 pm, Cowley, AB**

## Eagle Butte Mountain Bluebird Trail

I have always been interested in birds. In 1989, a write-up in the local newspaper, followed by a small informal presentation, and a cold drive out to bluebird territory, and I was assigned a route to monitor. I was pretty green, just opened the box, and recorded what I saw. I found it fascinating to observe the birds through their whole cycle. I learned as I went, did lots of observing and reading about bluebirds, and picked the brains of others. The next year, our coordinator moved and I sort of inherited his position, trying to work full time, spend a day every weekend on the trail, and co-ordinate others. It was hectic at times, but successful seasons were most rewarding. Replacement boxes were in short supply, but Fish and Game came to our rescue with all the sturdy boxes we could possibly use. A few years later, when we were scrambling for more help, we held a session on bluebirds at the Police Point Interpretive Centre. That, as well as a resulting newspaper article attracted new monitors, most of who are still with us. We are very fortunate in that we have 14 "teams" to monitor six sections of trail, totaling about 100 boxes. Monitors commit to whatever time they want to spend. Routes are scheduled and shared so that some monitors go every second week while others go every third week. They enjoy getting out into the country and checking on the birds without adding other major responsibilities. I still do monitoring, all the banding, compiling of data, and most of the maintenance. But, even though I am now retired, I would be hard pressed without all the extra help.

A few years ago I was contacted by Allan Kuzyk and became aligned with Mountain Bluebird Trails, which has been a great support. Allan and Harold Janecke visited our trail and taught me how to band. It is encouraging to have knowledgeable people and an organization such as MBT on which to rely.

Our trail has had its ups and downs over the years – weather, predators, and conflict with others over territory, but we have carried on, continually upgrading and maintaining a good system of trails. Providing nest boxes for bluebirds and observing them through all their life stages has been very rewarding!

~ Carol Porter/Medicine Hat~



## Congratulations!

Peter & Jennifer Davis welcome their first child, Berend Davis, born on January 24, 2003. Weighing in at a healthy 9 lb. and 2 oz. Both mother and son are happy and getting their rest. All the best to the new family.

Happy Birthday!



Ralph Erdman's  
90th  
Celebration on July 19<sup>th</sup>  
2:00-4:00 pm  
Sven Ericksen's Restaurant  
Calling all Bluebirders!

## A Bluebird Found in a River?

Band 1541-13170 was found dead on June 3, 2002, tangled up in fishing line, in a shrub at the edge of the Oldman River near the confluence of the Oldman and the Livingstone Rivers, by a group of wildlife biologists and technicians who were conducting a Harlequin Duck survey.

Harlequin Ducks are only found breeding in Alberta in fast flowing streams near the Rocky Mountains, and the survey was to find the extent of their breeding locations. A pre-nest survey is conducted in late May and/or early June to identify the number of breeding pairs and identify staging areas, and a brood survey in late July and/or early August to determine production.

One of the technicians, Linda Cerney of Lethbridge, was assigned to report the band to find the details of its banding. A "Report to Bander" received from the Banding Office indicated that this bluebird was banded as a young on June 10, 2000 by Marijke and Wim Jalink on their bluebird trail 5 km west of Millarville. It was found about 90 km south of where it was banded.

What is the most likely explanation for why it was tangled up in fishing line? There was some fishing line seen in the bird's mouth when it was examined by the technicians and biologists. It is thought that the bluebird may have gone for a fisherman's fly and couldn't extricate itself and then was left there by the fisherman.

Thanks to Linda Cerney who supplied the information on the Harlequin Duck surveys.

Submitted by Don Stiles  
Calgary, AB



# “Awards Corner”....

## Again!

Our very own Harold Janecke was recently awarded the Queen’s Golden Jubilee medal for outstanding contributions to conservation with MBT, DU and Fish & Wildlife. The ceremony was on Feb 28<sup>th</sup> at Sven Erickson’s, Ken Nicol presented to Harold. **Way to go Harold!**

*Harold was also a recipient of the “Blue Feather Award”/ 2001, and a Certificate of Appreciation by the Order of the Big Horn/2002.*

## MADE TO ORDER



JENNIFER ELVES (ING) PHOTO

Dave Friebel, director of the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society, assembles pieces for one of the 100 bluebird nest boxes he’s going to build for southern Alberta communities with 10 sheets of plywood donated by Pincher Creek Co-op.

## NEST BOX BUILDING

This year the Pincher Creek Co-op has again generously donated another ten sheets of plywood to our society, many thanks. Ten sheets make the equivalent of 100 Boxes, add to that the remainder of the material we received from the University and we were able to make 132 boxes all told. We appreciate that as last year we gave out 127 boxes and this year there is a trail that needs a fair bit of upgrading, hence we will probably use them all again. Thank you Pincher Creek Co-op.

Jim Huber helped with the box building and is now a “CERTIFIED JOURNEYMAN HOME BUILDER” (Bluebird that is). Thanks for the help Jim!

*Dave Friebel*

## Visit the Helen Schuler Coulee Centre soon!

*Lethbridge, Alberta*

### Birdwatching for Beginners

(5 Monday evening classes)

May 26 – June 23, 2003

7:00 – 9:00 pm

Call to pre-register  
403-320-3064

### Water Colours In

Nature

(4 Monday evening classes)

April 26 – May 19, 2003

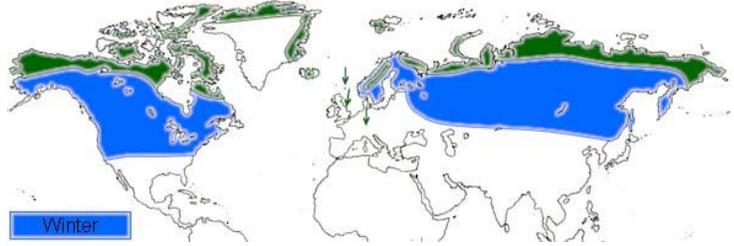
6:30 – 9:00 pm

Call to pre-register  
(Limited to 20 seats)



## SNOWY OWL *Nyctea scandiaca*

**Size:** Length 51-68½ cm (20-27") average female 66cm (26" inches), male 59cm (23")  
Wingspan 137-164cm (54-65")  
Weight 1134-2000g (40-70oz) average female 1707g (60oz), male 1612g (57oz)



**Mortality:** Snowy Owls can live at least 9½ years in the wild and 35 years in captivity. Natural enemies are few - Arctic foxes and wolves prey upon them on their tundra breeding grounds, while skuas and jaegers may take eggs or chicks.

**Description:** The Snowy Owl is a large, diurnal white Owl that has a rounded head, yellow eyes and black bill. The feet are heavily feathered. A distinctive white Owl, their overall plumage is variably barred or speckled with thin, black, horizontal bars or spots. Females and juveniles are more heavily marked than males - adult males may be almost pure white, although they have up to three tail bands. Adult females are distinctly barred throughout, and have from four to six tail bands. Immatures are very heavily barred throughout, and dark spotting may co dominate or dominate the overall plumage. Intensity of dark spotting varies with the sex of the immature, females being the darkest. Juveniles are uniformly brown with scattered white tips of down. Snowy Owls have a direct, strong, and steady flight with deliberate, powerful downstrokes and quick upstrokes. They make short flights, close to the ground, from perch to perch, and usually perches on the ground or a low post. During hot weather, they can thermo regulate by panting and spreading their wings.

**Hunting & Food:** Most hunting is done in the "sit and wait" style, swiveling the head as much as 270 degrees scanning for prey. These Owls are highly diurnal, although they may hunt at night as well. Prey are captured on the ground, in the air, or snatched off the surface of water bodies. When taking snowshoe hares, a Snowy Owl will sink its talons into the back and back flap until the hare is exhausted. The Owl will then breaks its neck with its beak. Snowy Owls will often raid trap lines for trapped animals and bait, and will learn to follow trap lines regularly. They also snatch fish with their talons. Small prey up to small hares are swallowed whole, while larger prey are carried away and torn into large chunks. Small young are fed boneless and furless pieces. Large prey is carried of in the Owl's talons, with prey like lemmings being carried in the beak. Snowy Owls are mainly dependent on lemmings and voles throughout most of their Arctic and wintering range. When these prey are scarce they are an opportunistic feeder and will take a wide range of small mammals and birds. Some mammal prey includes mice, hares, muskrats, marmots, squirrels, rabbits, prairie dogs, rats, moles, and entrapped furbearers. Birds include ptarmigan, ducks, geese, shorebirds, Ring-necked Pheasants, grouse, American coots, grebes, gulls, songbirds, and Short-eared Owls. Snowy Owls will also take fish and carrion. Some nesting Owls switch from lemmings and voles to young ptarmigan when they become available. Snowy Owls do not hunt near their nests, so other birds, such as Snow Geese; often nest nearby to take advantage of the Owls driving off predators such as foxes.

**Breeding:** Courtship behaviour can begin in midwinter through to March and April, well away from breeding areas. Males will fly in undulating, moth-like flight when females are visible. On the ground males will bow, fluff feathers, and strut around with wings spread and dragging on the ground. Males kill and display prey in caches to impress females, often feeding the female. The Snowy Owl nests almost exclusively on the ground, where the female makes a shallow scrape with her talons on top of an elevated rise, mound, or boulder. Abandoned eagle nests and gravel bars are used occasionally. Nests may be lined with scraps of vegetation and Owl feathers. Nest sites must be near good hunting areas, be snow-free, and command a view of surroundings. There is little breeding site-faithfulness between years or mates in some areas, but in other areas, a pair of Owls may nest in the same spot for several years. Territories around nests range from 1½ to 6½ square kilometres (0.6 to 2½ square miles), and overlap with other pairs. Breeding occurs in May, Clutch and brood sizes are heavily dependent on food supply. Snowy Owls may not nest at all during years of low lemming numbers. Clutch sizes normally range from 5 to 8 white eggs but may be as many as 14 eggs during high lemming years. They are laid at approximately 2-day intervals. The female incubates while the male brings her food and guards the nest. Eggs hatch in 32-34 days at two-day intervals, leading to large age differences in nests with large clutch sizes. Young are covered in white down. Young begin to leave the nest after about 25 days, well before they can fly. They are fledged at 50 to 60 days. Both parents feed and tend the young, and are fiercely protective and may attack intruders up to 1 kilometre (0.6 miles) from the nest! Nestling Owls require about 2 lemmings/day and a family of Snowy Owls may eat as many as 1,500 lemmings before the young disperse. Snowy Owls are single brooded and likely do not lay replacement clutches if their first clutch is lost. Almost 100% nesting success can be achieved during good vole years. Numbers fluctuate wildly, usually in concert with lemming and vole numbers. For Example, Banks Island may have 15,000 to 20,000 Snowy Owls during good lemming years and only 2,000 during low lemming years with densities ranging from 1 Owl per 2.6 square kilometre (1 Owl per square mile) in good lemming years to 1 Owl per 26 square kilometres (1 Owl per 10 square miles) in low lemming years.

**Habitat:** The Snowy Owl is a bird of Arctic tundra or open grasslands and fields. They rarely venture into forested areas. During southward movements they appear along lakeshores, marine coastlines, marshes, and even roost on buildings in cities and towns. In the Arctic, they normally roost on pingaluks (rises in the tundra) and breed from low valley floors up to mountain slopes and plateaus over 1,000 meters (3,000 feet) in elevation. When wintering in the Arctic, they frequent wind-swept tundra with little snow or ice accumulation. At more southern latitudes they typically frequents agricultural areas.

**Distribution:** Circumpolar - Arctic regions of the old and new worlds.

**North America** - Snowy Owls breed in the western Aleutian Islands, and from northern Alaska, northern Yukon, and Prince Patrick and northern Ellesmere islands south to coastal western Alaska, northern Mackenzie, southern Keewatin, extreme northeastern Manitoba, Southampton and Belcher islands, northern Quebec and northern Labrador. The Snowy Owl is highly nomadic. During periods of lemming and vole population crashes in the Arctic, or excessive cold and snow in winter, mass movements of Snowy Owls occur into southern Canada and northern United States. These invasions occur every 3 to 5 years, but are highly irregular. Adult females stay furthest north while immature males move furthest south during these incursions. In some years small numbers may reach as far south as central California, southern Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Oklahoma, central and southeastern Texas, the Gulf States and Georgia.

# Happenings at Wild Bird Crossings

~ CVC Farms ~  
Pincher Creek, Alberta

*Farmers Markets ~ Every Saturday!*  
July and August, 2003



*Guest Speaker ~ Myrna Pearman*  
Nature Scaping  
April 12 (call to confirm)

*Aboriginal Historic Site Tours*  
Call for times and pre-registration

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

## Trail Management Update

If you managed to attend the Annual General Meeting on Saturday October 26/02, on display we had 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 or 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 thought 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 then we will provide you with a copy of the image for your records—just ask us for a copy.

Our plan for 2003 is to complete the mapping of the bander (sub-permittee holders) and begin to contact the monitors. If you are interested in having your trail mapped this year then call Gwen @ 553-2780 to arrange an assistant to accompany you on your trail. Our hope is to complete this project by 2004—please help us!

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

## Memorandum

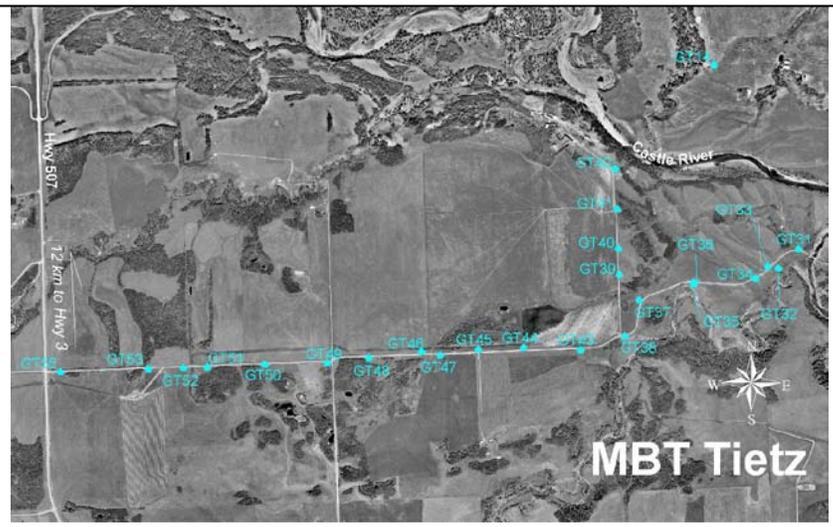
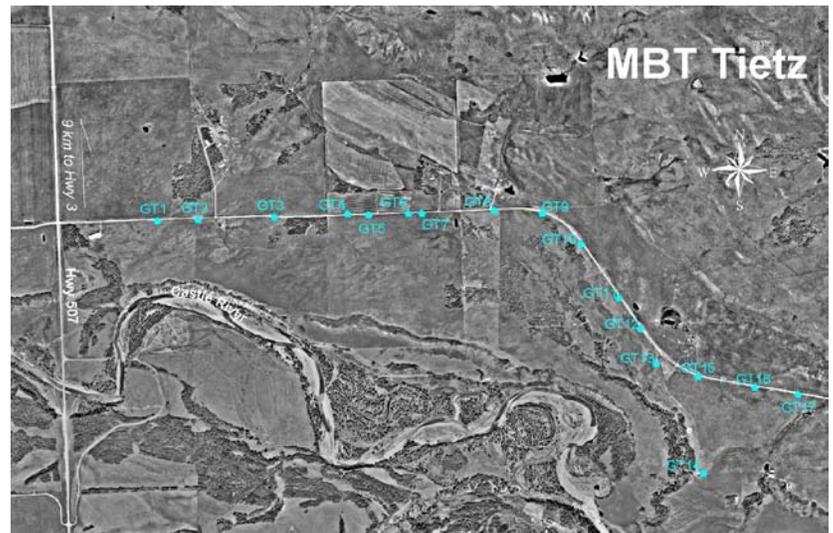
It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Armin Dyck a long time friend of the bluebird, a naturalist, storyteller, and among a select few of recognized amateur archeologists.

Armin was recognized by Ducks Unlimited Canada with a Life Sponsor and Pewter Teal award for his lifetime contributions and volunteer support.

Armin also had a bluebird trail east of Coutts, Alberta, for many years. The area is known as the Verdigris and was very unique as it was situated on the treeless prairie. This successful trail located in such a diverse ecosystem attracted the interest of both biologists and naturalists.

Armin will be missed by all.

## Sample "Trail Map"



## “Sterile Eggs”?

Upon receipt of your statistical sheets this year, take note of the two additional lines of information requested:

*“Abandonment: Because only the female has a brood patch, she alone is capable of incubating the eggs. If she is killed or for some other reason permanently leaves the nest during incubation, the male cannot complete this initial phase of the young’s life cycle. A female will sometimes abandon a nest if she is disturbed, especially during the first 12 days or so of incubation. Never attempt to foster out the eggs to other nests. Simply clean out the nest for the bluebirds to start over again.”\**

Carefully record each week in your field notes the appearance of the eggs, when a clutch is known to be in a box for an extended period of time and have not been incubated, remove them and record them as “abandoned” on your stats sheet. These eggs will differ from the eggs in a nest along side hatchlings /nestlings that are typically classed as “sterile”.

The multitude of “abandoned” eggs after the two spring storms were incorrectly classified as “sterile” last year. In order to reflect accurate statistics the Board of Directors have voted to make this change in venue. Thanks for your assistance.

*\*Myrna Pearman  
Mountain Bluebird*

*Trail Monitoring Guide*

*Call 553-2780 to purchase your copy!*

## ~Environment Canada~ Canadian Wildlife Service Notice West Nile Virus Precautions

*“While available literature indicates that the odds are low, it is possible that anyone handling birds and birding equipment could contact West Nile Virus or other infectious diseases. The bird banding office reminds banders and assistants to take precautions to avoid coming into contact with bird blood, excrement and other body fluids. Avoid ingesting, inhaling or getting these in open cuts and scratches.*

*Along with precautions to protect yourselves, please consider ways to reduce transmission of WNV and other infectious diseases from one bird to another. Avoid bringing captured birds into contact with other birds’ blood or excretions. We know that neither the impact the disease will have on wild bird populations, nor the impact that banding operations could have on disease transmission. While populations of abundant species could recover after being reduced by the disease, those of rare or endangered species might not.”*

When out and about on your trails, wash your hands repeatedly throughout the day if you know you have come in contact with body fluids. If we all work together the impact could be reduced.

*Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society of So. Alberta*



## 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.***



# gifts of the grasslands

CANADIAN  
NATURE FEDERATION



2003 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, MEDICINE HAT, ALBERTA, JUNE 19-22

<http://www.natureline.info/cnf.htm>

## Contact Info:

CNF National Conference  
2003  
PO Box 2491  
Medicine Hat, Alberta  
T1A 8G8

## OR:

Gwen @ 553-2780 for  
copies of the Registration  
forms & pamphlet.

## Speakers:

**Keynote Speaker**- Wayne Lynch- His name is synonymous with wildlife photography. As well, he's internationally known as a writer, explorer, and conservationist. His keynote address, *Prairie Grasslands: the Beauty and the Biology*, reflects his great love of the Canadian prairies.

**Banquet Speaker**- John Acorn-Broadcaster, entertainer, TV's "Nature Nut"; writer, passionate entomologist, dedicated naturalist- and one who's a whole lot of fun: that begins to describe John Acorn. He's a natural as a banquet speaker.

**Plenary Session**-Cliff Wallis- Cliff is an avid naturalist and a Professional Biologist. He has done outstanding audio-visual work and assessments of wild land. Canadians best know him for his love and knowledge of grassland and parkland ecosystems in Alberta. He is also Past President of the Canadian Nature Federation and is at present president of the AWA.

## Sessions:

The following are the sessions you will be able to choose from. Four sessions will run concurrently. The sessions run all day, Friday, June 20.

### Theme 1- The High Plains

Pat Fargey (Parks Canada)- **Grasslands National Park's Top Ten**

Major (Ret.) Dan Davies- **Suffield National Wildlife Area**

Dr.Geoff Holroyd (Canadian Wildlife Service)-**The Ups and Downs of Prairie Raptors**

Ryan Beck and Dr Dan Johnson (Agriculture Canada)- **One Four Grasslands: Ecosystem research in grazed grassland**

### Theme 2- Rivers and Wetlands

Lorne Fitch(Alberta Fish and Wildlife)-**Riparian 101: All you ever dreamed of knowing about the Green Zone**

Dr.Stewart Rood (University of Lethbridge)-**Cottonwood Forests, River Meanders**

Bob Sanford (Coordinator)-**The Wonder of Water celebration**

Glen Semenchuk,George Newton (Federation of Alberta Naturalists)-**Alberta's Important Bird Areas: Chappice Lake and Shorebirds**

### Theme 3- Forest and Fescue

Dave Sauchyn (University of Regina)- **Geology of the Cypress Hills Landscapes**

Ksenija Vujnovic (Alberta Natural Heritage Information Centre)-**Rare Plants of the Cypress Hills**

Cleve Werschler (Sweetgrass Consultants)- **Wildlife of Forest and Fescue**

Hyland Armstrong (Rancher)-**Managing Wildlife Habitat: a rancher's perspective**

### Theme 4- Adaptations to a Dry Land

Dr Gail Michener (University of Lethbridge)- **Divine Secrets of the yaya squirrelhood:kith and kin, predators and parasites of the Richardson's ground squirrel**

Cliff Wallis (Cottonwood Consultants)- **Shifting Sands: sandhills ecology**

Cam Aldridge (University of Alberta)-**Has the Sun set for Sage Grouse?Linking population declines to resources**

Dr Larry Powell (University of Calgary)-**Short Horned Lizards and Prairie Rattlers in Alberta**

## *2003 First Sighting???*

Whilst sipping my coffee  
Out the window I see  
One sole male bluebird  
Came to visit me  
It's early, I know  
But here's to hoping  
O'Mother Nature will be kind  
As this o'guy is searching hard  
For food to survive  
Until the thaw brings a mate  
and couple makes three!

**Robert Tietz officially sighted one male bluebird, right out our back window, March 15, 2003, 8:00 am, Moon River Estates (15 minutes west of Lethbridge, AB).**

G Tietz

## **Donation Request:**

**All donations to Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society will receive a receipt to use at the time of filing your income tax!**

**Please!** We struggle to cover the cost of producing newsletters, postage, banding statistics and mandatory documents.

**Can you spare \$10, \$20 or \$30 annually?**

**Cheques are made payable to Mountain Bluebird Trails and can be mailed to P.O Box 401, Lethbridge, AB T1J-3Z1**

**"Help Us Help the Bluebirds!"**



# Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society

Volume Three ~ Fall 2003

Editor: G Tietz

## Mark-Recapture of Songbirds in Waterton Lakes National Park

Cyndi Smith, Conservation Biologist, WLNP

In 2002 I initiated a MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) station in Waterton Lakes National Park (WLNP). This involves banding individual birds during the breeding season (considered to extend from May 31 to August 8 at this latitude) to aid in obtaining demographic information (e.g., productivity, age, sex, differential survival rates), which could help identify population declines or increases. On seven days during that period (one day each 10-day period) we operated 10 nets for six hours, starting at sunrise, for a rough total of 42 hours of effort. During the two years of operation we have captured 33 species. The habitat is a diversity of grassland, aspen woodland and shrub land. The five commonest species captured have been: yellow warbler, house wren, veery, least flycatcher and black-capped chickadee. Some of the rarities have included: Cooper's hawk, Cassin's vireo and American redstart. Black-headed grosbeaks have been a little more common than anticipated. I hope to operate this station for at least five consecutive years and perhaps longer. This project would not be possible without the help of the numerous volunteers who have foregone many hours of precious sleep to come out for these early mornings.

*A few of the banders from Mountain Bluebird Conservation Society participated in 2002 & 2003. It has been an enjoyable undertaking for us all, special thanks to Cyndi for letting us participate!*

## MAPS ~ Waterton Park 2002

*Reprinted from Fall 2002-G. 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 ones 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!



# Don't Miss It!

## Annual General Meeting ~ 2003 ~

### Saturday, October 25<sup>th</sup> 1:30 – 4:00

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: 327-8426  
Ray 553-2646  
Gwen 553-2780

**Contacting MBT:**  
P.O. Box 401 Stn Main  
Lethbridge, AB T1J-3Z1  
(403)553-2780  
email: [mtn@telus.net](mailto:mtn@telus.net)

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# President's Message

The following is a summary of an article which appeared in the Canadian Geographic, July/August 2003, Vol. 123, No. 4, by Peter Christie. **Faux Feathered Friends.**

*Birds which have brilliant colors have thought to have evolved so that the male of the species have greater competition for females than drab colored species which might not suffer competition for mates. Biologists at Queen's University using a small spectrometer have discovered some new information concerning the rather plain feathers of black-capped chickadees. Most human observers are unable to distinguish males from females in this species. However the spectrometer reveals in ultraviolet light the males cap and bib have brighter whites and greater contrast, which the females are capable of recognizing. It is not yet known whether the females use this in selecting a male.*

The article states "research indicates that bird's eyes see more colours and with greater acuity than humans can". If you don't subscribe, borrow a copy from a friend or go to your public library.

**July 16** - Went out on my trail to band several nests of MOBL (Mountain Bluebird) and TRES (Tree Swallow) which were late starters. Deer Fly season here begins in July and lasts for about 2-3 weeks. My day out was in "Prime Fly Time". It is not uncommon to be attacked by about two dozen of these little critters at each box (they BITE), leaving a pretty good itching welt. One TRES nestbox had six nestlings, fully feathered, parents flitting overhead, in the other three TRES boxes the nestlings were not fully feathered and showed some bare skin. The AHY-F's (After Hatch Year Female) were in each nestbox mantling the nestlings. I thought this unusual as the outside temperature was 29C. There were swarms of Deer Flies buzzing the boxes. Some of the nestlings had adult Deer Flies attached to bare skin parts much like blowfly larva. I pulled them off and each time a small drop of blood appeared. Were the females in the boxes trying to shield their nestlings from these pesky insects? (I think so). The three females had slightly soiled bib feathers. Aha, the coin dropped! They may have picked up the ("dirt") by brushing against the nestlings when trying to protect them from the flies. Later I saw two other TRES on a fence wire, one with white bib feathers and the other light grey. Maybe I now have a way a sexing TRES, at least in blowfly season. Probably there are many monitors who may agree/disagree and others who may say "it sure took him a long time to find that out".

**July 19** - I monitored my second trail (at Maycroft), checking my notes from the previous weeks visit said the box - TRES - 6 Nestlings 2Y2B (my shorthand, meaning to young to band). I expected six ready for me, opening the lid I found only two, the missing four were much too young to have fledged. One of the remaining two was healthy; the second had half its bill missing. Picking it up for a look, it had been chewed by something with sharp teeth, leaving a fresh wound revealing pink flesh with some blood. Another conundrum, a small rodent, mouse, vole or shrew? Nest was clean, no feathers, or remains of missing nestlings. It seems one must always expect the unexpected.

Many over wintering species and migrating birds came to our feeders this spring, including three pair of cowbirds, who especially liked the feeder filled with millet. We have an unobstructed view as they feed. The first week in August an unusual feeding event occurred. Simultaneously on two side by side bushes, ten feet from our kitchen window, we witnessed a fledgling cowbird doing his "I am hungry routine", i.e. beak gaping, body doing a shimmy and wings fluttering. It was being fed by an Evening Grosbeak. Three feet away the same shimmy was being repeated with another fledging cowbird being fed by a White Crown Sparrow. A third was being fed by a Pine Siskin who was much smaller than its recipient. It seems egg dumpers have the best of both worlds. Do these cowbird nestlings/fledglings imprint? If so how do they "Un-imprint" when it comes time to mate? The coin has not dropped on this one as yet for me; can anyone more knowledgeable help me?"

Also in this same bushy area I have three nestboxes which I keep for HOWRs (House Wrens). However very late springs and snow storms in 2002 and 2001 must have played havoc with the wren population, for the first time in 20 years no HOWRs. This has not deterred the chipmunks. They have built nests in all three boxes, which I have pulled out repeatedly just in case HOWR's appeared. I finally gave up and let the chipmunks have a go. All three boxes "Fledged" healthy broods of young. They like black sunflower seeds also.

Long time MBT Bluebirder Ralph Erdman celebrated his 90th birthday, July 19 at Sven Erickson's in Lethbridge. There were many of his fellow bluebird friends among the nearly 200 guests. Ralph has crammed much into nine decades. He obtained his Bachelor and Master's degrees in the "Dirty Thirties". No mean feat, leaving the farm in the Barons/Carmangay area to go to the U of A in the midst of the Great Depression. He has been a successful farmer, earning the title of "World Wheat King" in 1961. He is an accomplished photographer, winning many awards. He also has been an agricultural consultant, and a rural land assessor for several municipal districts in southern Alberta. Our lives have been enriched by crossing trails with this splendid "Gentleman."

~ Ray Harris ~

## Oldest Mountain Bluebirds and Tree Swallows

-Don Stiles

What is the longevity of the bluebirds and Tree Swallows that we find in our nest boxes? Table 1 shows the oldest Mountain Bluebirds (MOBL) and Tree Swallows (TRES) that have been recaptured in the Calgary area since 1989. We have found that every year since 1996, an 8 or a 9 year old Tree Swallow has been recaptured, and in 2002 there was one of each. The record for longevity for Tree Swallows reported to the Bird Banding Office in Laurel, MD is an 11 year old from Long Point, ON.

For Mountain Bluebirds, the oldest bird recaptured has been 6 years old, and the last one of these was in 1998. However, we have learned that the Southern Alberta Mountain Bluebird Trails from Lethbridge, AB (from Gwen Tietz) has a record of a 7 year old Mountain Bluebird, and Ellis Bird Farm (from Myrna Pearman) has records of two 8 year old Mountain Bluebirds, one banded as a young and the other banded as an adult, making it at least 8 years old. (For simplicity in Table 1, there is no distinction as to whether birds were banded as adults or young, and birds banded as adults are assumed to have been one year old. In some cases, they will have been older.)

Table 1 shows that in most years, 5 year old birds are recaptured. It starts at 5 years old, as 4 year old birds are much more common, which suggests that 4 years is a reasonable life expectation for the birds which use our nest boxes. Our first 5 year old bird was recaptured in 1989, which is the first year shown.

Table 2 shows that we banded 20964 Tree Swallows (16.0% adults and 84.0% young), and 26793 Mountain Bluebirds (8.9% adults and 91.1% young) to get our results. I began banding Mountain Bluebirds and Tree Swallows on my bluebird trails in 1981. I added my first subpermittee in 1982 (Ray Woods), and gradually added more until now there are 19 active subpermittees who also do banding. Some band only a few birds each year, and some band only Mountain Bluebirds. The one who bands the most birds each year is George Loades, who began banding in 1986. His average number of birds banded per year (from his 350 nest boxes) from 1996 to 2001 was 731 Mountain Bluebirds (62 adults and 731 young) and 697 Tree Swallows (80 adults and 617 young). The adults we band are primarily females, but occasionally a male will be banded, when caught.

This article suggests that Tree Swallows live longer than bluebirds. We would be interested in learning if others have shared this experience.

### Oldest Birds Recaptured - Calgary Area

Age Year	TRES					MOBL		
	5	6	7	8	9	5	6	7
2002	5	1		1	1	5		
2001		2	2	1		1		
2000	6				1	3		
1999	5	1		1		1		
1998	2		1	1		1	1	
1997	2	4	1		1	3		
1996	1		1	1		3	2	
1995	2	2	1			6	1	
1994	1	2	1	1		3	1	
1993	1	1	1			2	1	
1992	3					2		
1991	2					2		
1990						1		
1989						2		
Total	30	13	8	6	3	35	6	0

## Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society

### Receives New Computer/Printer for the Birds

Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society of Alberta is pleased to announce it has recently received \$4000 from the Shell Canada Community Service Fund.

The funds have been awarded to recognize and support Shell Canada employees in southern Alberta. Max Goodfellow, Jim Huber and retired employees Clyde Brown and Fred Wishneski, regularly volunteer as members of Mountain Bluebird Trails. Their monitoring consists of checking the boxes for nests, eggs, nestlings and fledglings, as well as predation. They also have Environment Canada banding permits to band the adults and nestlings. The money will be used to purchase a new computer and printer, both necessary accessories to meet today's banding information remittance requirements, "says Ray Harris, president of MBT.

"Shell believes that contributions of time, effort and caring to non-profit organizations benefit the entire community. Through the Community Service Fund, we recognize and support Shell people who give personal time to non-profit organizations on a regular basis," says Jeff Gabert, Shell Public Affairs.

Mr. Gabert continues, "We have supported Shell volunteers through the Community Service Fund for 25 years. In 2002, Shell Canada granted \$430,000 to nearly 300 nonprofit organizations across Canada."

Ray Harris also mentions that this Shell Fund enabled MBT to purchase a Global Positioning System unit in 2001, and at present we have approximately 1500 of our 3000+ nest boxes recorded. Also in 1996 we received a generous donation to support a regional Mountain Bluebird Convention in Lethbridge.

The late Duncan Mackintosh of Lethbridge started Mountain Bluebird Trails in the Lethbridge area, beginning with 100 nest boxes in 1975. MBT now extends across the province from the Medicine Hat/Cypress Hills vicinity to the Crowsnest Pass and from Nanton south to the US border. MBT has over 3000 nest boxes, monitored by about 100 members. Since inception they have fledged over 54,000 Mountain Bluebirds and 8000 Tree Swallows, both species being native migratory birds.

People interested in more information concerning Shell's Community Service Fund can call 1-800-338-1410. Information concerning Mountain Bluebird Trails can be had by contacting Ray Harris at 553-2646 or Gwen Tietz, secretary at 553-2780

*Reprint from The Lethbridge Herald/  
Pincher Creek Echo/Crowsnest Pass Promoter*



# Thank You!

Shell Canada Ltd.

## DUNCAN J. MACKINTOSH - 1926-1995

My discovery of Bluebirds was in 1981, the year after our purchase of 32 acres "away up at the end of nowhere". Several days after my first bluebird spotting, an article appeared in the Calgary Herald featuring the North American Bluebird Society. This item told me all about Bluebirds. Like most neophytes I didn't know an Eastern from a Mountain or that there were three species, and I believed every word as gospel.

Diligently I built my trail and boxes following the plan as given by NABS. Using 1/4 or 3/8 inch plywood, 4x4 inch outside dimension, 1 1/2 inch entry, slightly sloping roof fasted to the front by a narrow brass screw. Not easy fastening to narrow plywood without splitting same. Where the roof met the back portion, one nailed a 1/2 inch dowel to stop rain from running into the nest.

I was out on my trail when to my anger and consternation a tall man with reddish hair was putting up humongous boxes between my NABS boxes. I stopped and was rather cool and standoffish. His voice came across with a strong Scottish accent. My boxes were all wrong, too small, poor thin wood, 1-1/2 inch opening, poor design, lousy roof. I was devastated that he would humble my NABS boxes. After all NABS should be a recognized standard.

This was my introduction to Duncan. He soon enhanced my humble knowledge and like his early monitors I became a confirmed disciple. I destroyed and replaced the NABS boxes with Duncan's boxes which now have become the standard box as used by most Alberta monitors.

The close ties between MBT Alberta and MBT Montana were forged by Duncan and Art Aylesworth. They fostered cooperation, shared knowledge and jointly operated as if there were no international border. They started two year regional rotating conventions which were alternated in venues such as Great Falls, Plains, Lethbridge and Pincher Creek. This cooperation between the two MBT's continues as a legacy to these two Bluebirders.

One of my most treasured experiences with Duncan occurred in 1989. The federal government requested a unique display by every province to celebrate Canada Day, July 1 in the nation's capital. Duncan was asked to represent Alberta with a display and explanation of Mountain Bluebirds. He asked me to accompany and assist him. We were set up in front of the Parliament Buildings on Capital Hill, before an estimated crowd of 100,000 who wandered around our exhibits. It was a once in a lifetime experience for me to share with my Bluebird Friend.

Duncan began his bluebird crusade in 1974, he recognized the handicaps bluebirds were facing such as reduction and predation of secondary nesting sites, caused by man, raccoons, house sparrows and starlings. He started with his special surrogate nestboxes placing them along the roads, ranch and farm fence lines. He was the MOBL equivalent of Johnny Appleseed. Volunteer bluebirders joined him to form a group now known as Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society of Alberta. This group maintain approximately 3000 nestboxes on 700+ miles of trails in southern Alberta. Its fledglings to date have hit the 9000 mark.

In 1992 Duncan's dedication was recognized by The Alberta Federation Naturalists Association with their annual Loran J. Goulden Memorial Award.

He was also a director of NABS and received an award from NABS.

MBT placed a tree in Lethbridge's Henderson Rose Garden area as a living memorial to Duncan. The mayor, David B. Carpenter, spoke at the dedication said "the loss of someone close is the most traumatic of human experiences, and this tree will grow as a permanent reminder of Duncan Mackintosh.



-Ray Harris

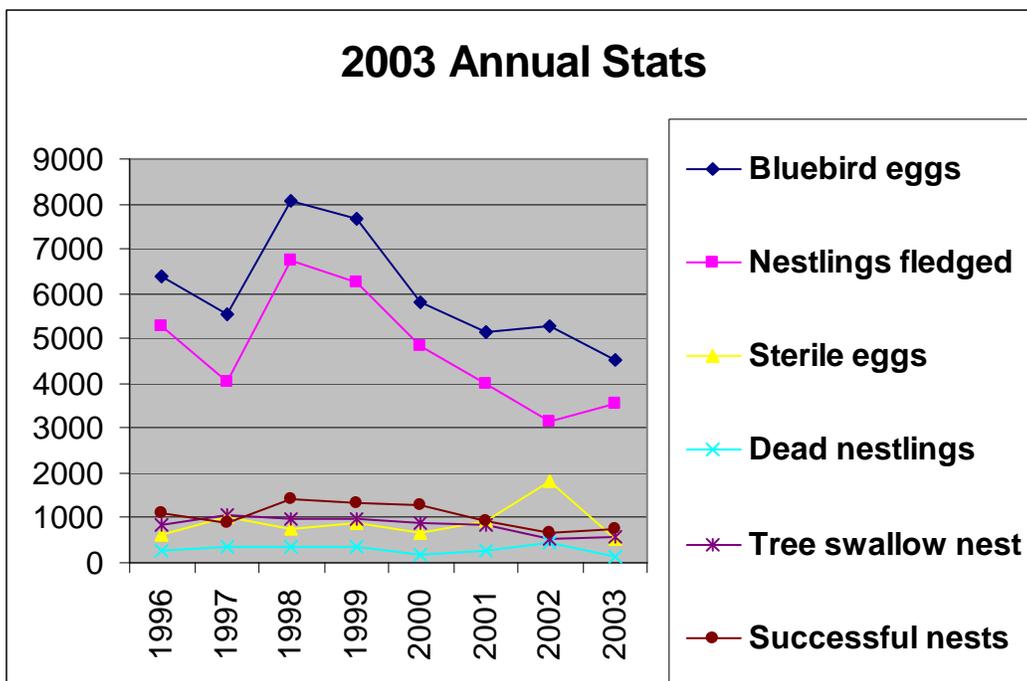
# Closing Out 2003

G Tietz

If memory serves me right, 2002 was a disaster with the blessed storms in May and June. So increase in the tallies would be an improvement for the bluebirds. Looks like we had a few hoorahs after all! Although the number of eggs was down considerably for the first time in many years, the sterile & abandoned eggs were also down. More importantly, the number of fledglings and the number banded were up. All in all, the numbers look much better than last year. Let's all hope that next year the odds are again in our favour.

Nature was mostly kind this year, except for the swallow population, cool springs are wreaking havoc with their food source I'm sure. I have enclosed a couple of articles on swallow and the weather impact for general interest. I heard many stories of boxes full of dead swallows, had a few myself. Let's hope they can make a comeback as they love those mosquitoes and anything to combat the West Nile packers are a friend of mine indeed.

Might I add one short note, an honest and sincere thank you to all the banders and monitors this year. With the exception of one person the stats were received by the first week of September. Thank you, thank you, thank you. This makes my life a lot easier and I am sure no one likes to have a call from me at this time of year.....



	1986	1990	1992	1994	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Boxes available	1976	2839	3108	3307	3312	3327	3200	3219	2897	2603	2085	2088
Successful nests	536	791	1549	1025	1096	901	1407	1315	1282	932	676	756
Bluebird eggs	3119	5176	10568	5598	6371	5527	8073	7673	5828	5128	5274	4522
Sterile eggs	322	641	1241	804	641	1014	775	872	679	947	1810	530
<b>Abandoned eggs</b>												<b>405</b>
Dead nestlings					251	376	362	375	158	279	462	132
Nestlings fledged	2649	3872	8232	4296	5267	4050	6755	6257	4847	3980	3145	3529
Adults banded	101	149	176	95	125	113	159	169	116	154	148	116
Nestlings banded	1727	2794	5701	2523	2687	2128	3985	3733	3167	2726	2148	2507
Recoveries			142	87	77	61	98	96	97	87	73	62
Tree swallow nests	444	234	583	644	823	1053	984	994	905	832	535	568
Wren nests	31	65	100	81	55	53	41	45	27	28	14	20
Sparrow nests					33	29	32	50	17	23	30	34
Stolen/vandalized					29	38	34	31	37	29	35	32
Used twice			811	230	221	206	531	243	346	248	149	492

# MBT, Inc. Annual Meeting

G Tietz

Annually our affiliate just south the border in Montana, MBT Inc. has their Annual Meeting. Both Ray Harris and Gwen Tietz were invited to attend the 2003 meeting in Great Falls. What a pleasure that was, the hospitality was outstanding. Here is the reprint of the event from MBT Inc Fall 2003 newsletter:

*"The Friday night of the BBQ was cold and wet so the potluck dinner was served indoors, but it didn't dampen the spirits of those attending from all over Montana. Meeting people from around the state and Alberta and sharing bluebird tales made it a festive occasion.*

*Saturday morning started early (7:30 a.m.) for those attending the two-hour banding clinic, Gwen Tietz instructed. A continental breakfast was laid out at 9:30 a.m. and the program was started at 10:00 a.m. Ray Harris talked about his trail in Alberta., John Citta reported on research findings to date, and a video were shown about St. Peters Mission. Bill Lauchner, Charlie Vaughn, and John Denton discussed how they got started in bluebirding and experiences on their trails.*

*There was a banquet Saturday evening after which Meriwether Lewis spoke on the birds and wildlife the expedition found in Montana. Sunday morning was a beautiful time for a fieldtrip to Dennis Peterson's trail near St. Peters Mission. A pair of bluebirds in one box gave everyone with a camera an opportunity for great pictures."*

I might suggest that attendance in the future would net a marvellous weekend for anyone. The folks south of the border can out on a fabulous event. We will release information on next year's meeting as soon as we have it available.



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