



BLUEBIRDS OF HAPPINESS: **How to Increase Their Numbers**

Written by Gloria Hildebrandt

▲ A male Eastern Bluebird
guards its nesting box.
PHOTO BY ROBERT MUELLER.

Eastern Bluebirds are one of the most beautiful birds in Ontario and can be found all along the Niagara Escarpment and even further north, up to Moosonee. At one time their numbers were declining, but proper nest box programs have helped the population recover. What's vital to know however, is that improper nest boxes do more harm than good, and Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society (OEBS) wants you to remove them if you're not prepared to manage them properly.





▲ Female Eastern Bluebird with her first-fledged chick of 2015.
PHOTO BY PATTY GALE.

◀ Young fledglings in Burlington. PHOTO BY OEBS MEMBER BARBARA CANNEY.



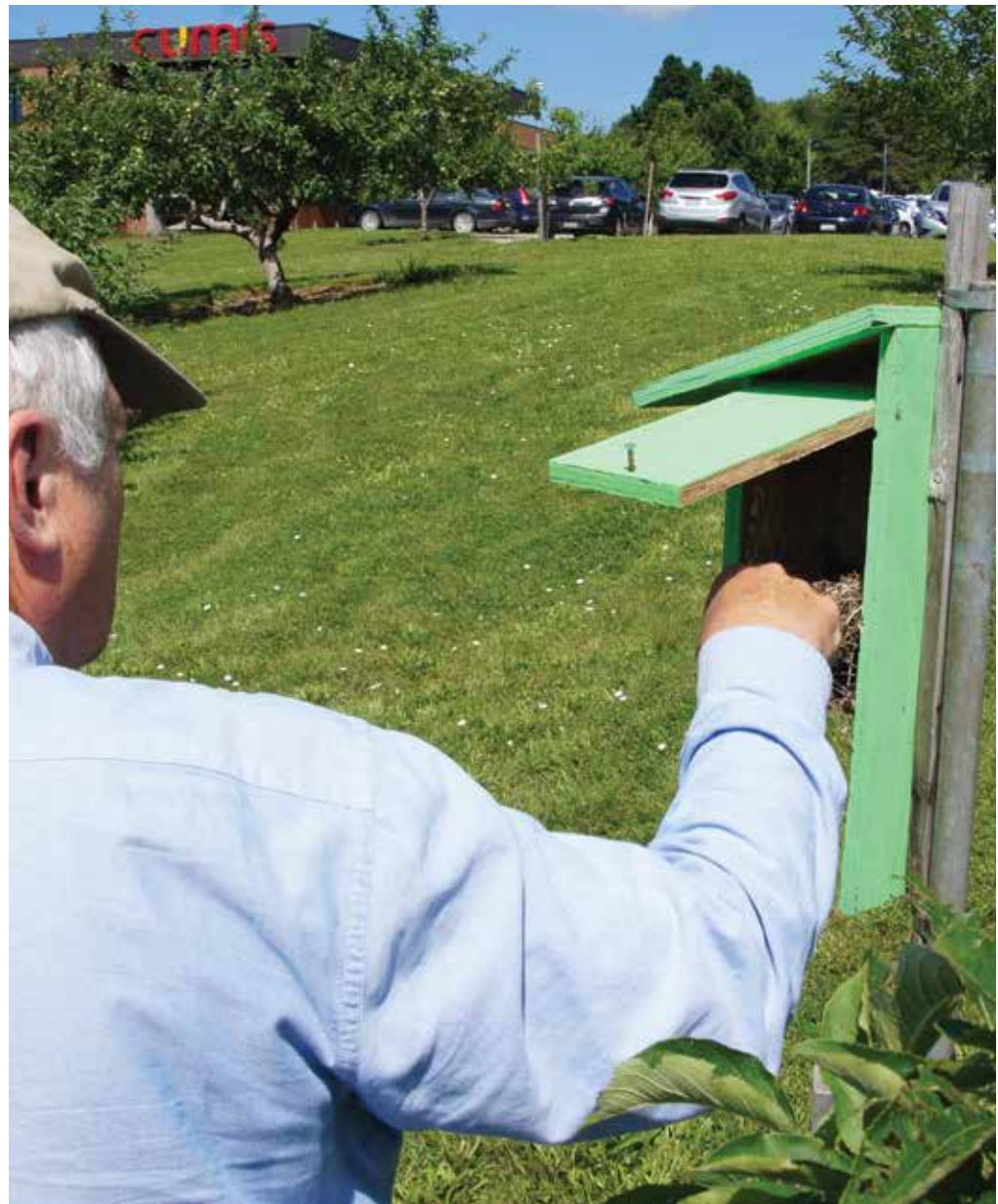
Bill Read, a former employee of Canadian Wildlife Service,

where he managed Bluebirds, founded OEBS 30 years ago. He is the current president and actively manages almost 400 nest boxes on his own.

“OEBS will not endorse any box on a tree or fence post,” Bill declares.

The reasons are clearly stated in the OEBS brochure: “Bluebird trails with boxes

located on fence posts can have a negative effect on bluebird populations. Raccoons, after finding food in a box (a female bluebird or young), will visit other boxes in the area and predate those as well. It is up to you to stop this from happening. Since natural cavities are located on a random basis, only that one nest would be lost. If you are not able to protect your boxes, you should consider removing them in order to



► Bill Read, president and founder of Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society, cleans out nesting boxes at Cumis Insurance Co. in Burlington. There are 11 boxes on the Cumis property. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

help the bluebird population. Unmanaged poorly located boxes continue to hurt the bluebird population.”

There is another, more difficult part of a proper bluebird nest program. House Sparrows will destroy bluebird eggs and kill both young and adults in a nest box, and so must never be permitted to rear their young on a bluebird nest box trail. They must be humanely killed or relocated at least 50 km away.

“If you cannot bring yourself to remove these alien predators,” the OEBS continues, “please remove your boxes as you are not helping the bluebird population.”

“I catch the sparrows and wring their necks,” says Bill. “Surgical dislocation is humane killing.”

Helping bluebirds reproduce is more involved than it would seem. Bill gets specific when he adds “People build far too many boxes and

don’t know what to do with them. The easiest thing is building the boxes but that’s only five per cent of it. The rest is locating boxes, monitoring them and recording what is in the nest box. We record egg totals, young that have hatched and how many fledged.”

Proper Nest Boxes

If you are able to do all that is necessary to manage a nest box program, OEBS and its website oeps.ca has

plenty of information about the correct ways to build and install boxes, including construction notes, nest box plans and cutting patterns.

“We do not recommend ventilation in any boxes,” says Bill. “In May we can get bitterly cold weather. The biggest factor affecting bluebird survival success is weather. The cold in May really kills them. Face the boxes to the south.” Box location and installation is the next step.

► Male Eastern Bluebird.
PHOTO BY ANN BROKELMAN.

“The important thing is putting boxes on metal poles with predator protection,” Bill warns. “Not on fences, not on trees. Those are just predator highways.” The OEBS website has a “hall of shame” with photos of improperly constructed or installed nest boxes that are worth studying.

Car grease smeared on the poles protects against dangers like raccoons which will devour the birds and eggs, and ants which can make nests inside the boxes and bite the birds. There are snakes that can get through the grease, and two species have protected status in Ontario, which means that they must not be harmed and must be allowed to take the bluebirds. They are Black Rat Snakes and Eastern Fox Snakes. There are special baffles that can be installed on the poles to prevent them from reaching the nest boxes.

OEBS has solutions and options to deal with other threats, including House Wrens, which as a protected migratory bird must not be interfered with, Deer Mice and woodpeckers, which can all hinder successful breeding by bluebirds.

Bluebird Behaviour

The bluebird nesting season is from April to August. A nest which has had bluebirds fledge will be flattened and fecal matter will be completely removed. If bluebird pairs mate successfully and rear young, they will remain together.

“After bluebirds fledge, parents feed them for about a week,” says Bill. “They like low grass where they can pick insects off the grass.” They can be fed mealworms from a feeder, especially when they’re nesting. Their main food in winter is Sumac trees.



► Adult male Eastern Bluebird singing.
PHOTO BY ED MCASKILL.

Bluebirds will return to the same site year after year, even reusing the same boxes. Bill knows this from his thorough records and the banded birds which return.

“Not everyone can band,” explains Bill. “You have to have a banding permit. I personally have banded about 8,000 bluebirds over 40 years. I band adult bluebirds and their young, and recapture previously banded adults as part of a study to look into reproductive success and longevity.” Bluebirds have a short lifespan, on average about two years.

“The longest bird for me is seven years,” Bill continues. “I have had three seven-year-

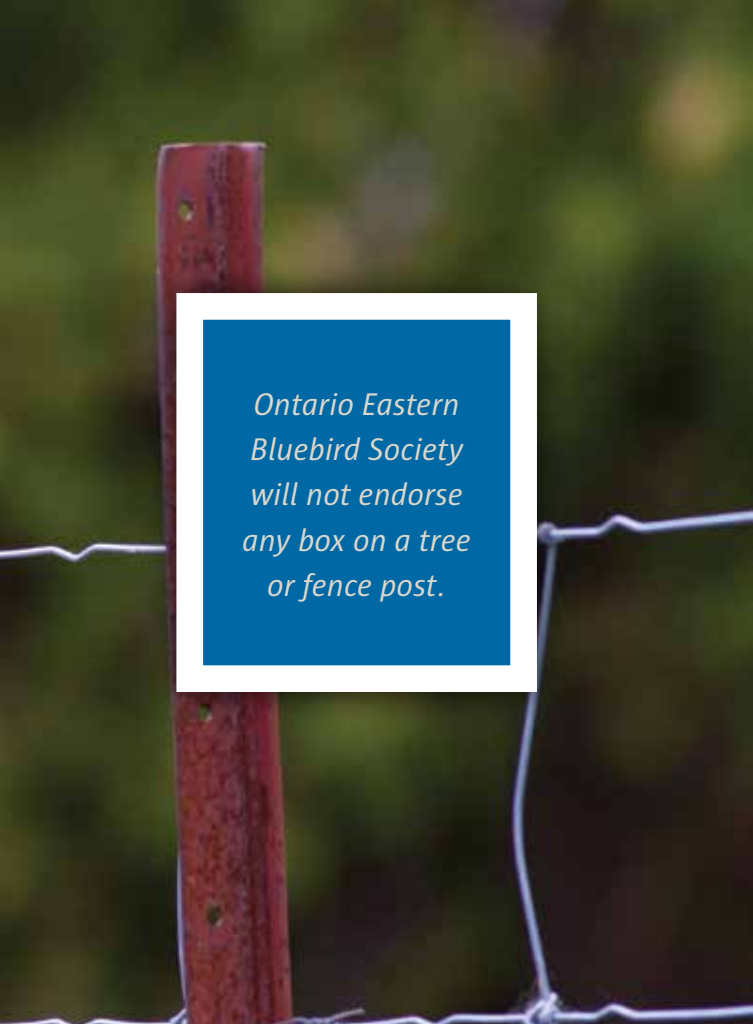
old birds. Last year [2016] all three nested successfully.”

Tree Swallows

Like bluebirds, Tree Swallows are cavity dwellers that will nest in birdboxes, but they aren’t a problem for bluebirds. Putting up twin boxes is a good idea, so one is available for each species.

“I like to have Tree Swallows and bluebirds together,” says Bill. “They make good neighbours. They provide protection for bluebirds by harassing predators.”

Tree Swallow don’t remove fecal matter in the last two days before fledging, so this signals when the swallows are about to leave the nest.

A photograph of a red wooden fence post. A white rectangular box is superimposed on the post, containing blue text. The background is a blurred green field.

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or fence post.*





▲ Male Eastern Bluebird.
PHOTO BY ROBERT MUELLER.

► Bill Read with his car full of
bluebird nesting box supplies.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

◀ Male Eastern Bluebird in
Campbellville.
PHOTO BY OEBS MEMBER KAREN ROOT.

They can live twice as long as bluebirds, about 3.6 years, according to Bill.

“I’ve had over 300 Tree Swallows killed by House Sparrows,” he says. “They’re both competing for a spot.” Last summer, Bill estimated

► A properly greased pole supports this approved nest box which was successfully used by Eastern Bluebirds.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



that he was going to have 400 bluebirds and 1,400 Tree Swallows fledge successfully.

Those interested in becoming more involved in Eastern Bluebird nesting programs can join OEBS

for \$15 for an annual family membership.

Contact Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society through www.oeps.ca, Facebook or 519.582.4382 **NEV**