

The Essex County Field Naturalists' Club Bluebird Committee Report 2015



Adult male Bluebird Photo courtesy of Graham Brown

Bluebird production was down in 2015. We only counted 17 successful pairs of Bluebirds in 2015 with 92 fledglings produced. That's quite a drop compared to 2014, when we counted 26 successful pairs with 115 fledgling Bluebirds.

Part of the problem was the weather. Most years, our Bluebirders are checking their houses through February and March...(replacing any damaged houses, relocating House Sparrows, and mice etc.) Unfortunately there was lots of snow in February and March. There was snow in April also. A lot of Bluebirders could not inspect their Birdhouses, due to the deep snow, in late Winter.

Many Bluebirders inspected their Birdhouses for the first time in April. A lot of their Houses had no Bluebirds or Tree Swallows ...just mice and House Sparrows. No "Hakuna matata" for

our native birds. ("Hakuna matata" is a Swahili phrase; translated, it roughly means "No worries") Fortunately the winter of 2015-2016 has been mild, with very little snow. The Bluebirders have been working on their Birdhouses. Hopefully our native birds will experience less trouble in the Spring of 2016.

Another reason for the Bluebird production drop, is the loss of good habitat. Over the last few years, we have lost some very good Bluebird trails. Some of these Bluebird habitats have been sold. For various reasons, the new owners do not want



Photo Courtesy of John Balga

us to continue monitoring. In the case of Club trails, we remove the Bird Houses in the Fall.

In the case of Affiliate Trails, we introduce ourselves to the new owners. We offer to continue to monitor. We give them literature about Bluebirds and Tree Swallows. We offer to teach them how to monitor. To date, no new property owners have accepted our offers.

On a positive note, the Tree Swallows had good production in 2015. In 2014 we counted 119 successful pairs of Tree Swallows, with 578 fledglings. In 2015, we recorded 139 successful pairs of Tree Swallows, which produced 638 fledglings.

Due to the mild winter, there are numerous reports of Wintering Bluebirds here in Essex County. A Note-worthy Bluebird sighting comes from Caroline Kopchuk. On Thursday, February 4, she saw a mixed flock of Robins and Bluebirds in Oakwood Park in South Windsor.

News From The Trails



*Photos Courtesy of Don Bissonnette
Great crested flycatchers*

Great Crested Flycatchers-This Summer, Joan Affleck discovered a nesting pair of Great Crested Flycatchers, while monitoring the Santarossa Bluebird Trail. These are large cavity nesters in the Flycatcher family. These birds are too large to fit in our Birdhouses. Their nest was in a PVC field tile which was hung on a wire.

Occasionally, this pair was joined by another pair of Great Crested Flycatchers. This visiting pair was seen in nearby trees. The 2 pairs would call to each other, but never approached each other.

Trouble at Tuckette Farm-In late winter, Gerard Tuckette trapped and relocated lots of House Sparrows. In March, a pair of Bluebirds bonded with a natural cavity. In early April, both of his Birdhouses were claimed by Tree Swallows.

Unfortunately, the House Sparrows continuously usurped the native birds. Gerard was trapping a few House Sparrows every week. He wondered, "Where are all of these House Sparrows were coming from?"

In early May, Gerard's neighbour, Bob came over to chat. Bob had a few Craft-store Birdhouses nailed to wooden posts. "I found a way to control Sparrows," said Bob, boastfully. "Over the past few weeks there were House Sparrows fighting with the Tree Swallows at my Birdhouses. I covered the Birdhouses with plastic bags. After a day or so, the Sparrows would go away. The Tree Swallows eventually came back. The Sparrows might come back, so I just cover the Birdhouses with the plastic bag again and hope they go away."

Gerard asked Bob, "And where do the Sparrows go?" Bob answered, "Away, I guess." Gerard explained to Bob, that his actions were leading to the Tuckette Farm native birds being usurped and killed. Gerard gave his neighbor a Van Ert trap, and showed him how to use it. Years ago, some Bluebirders did this dangerous short-sighted practice....covered up, or plugged up, any Birdhouses, where House Sparrows were settling in. The House Sparrows simply moved to the next closest cavity (natural or man-made) and killed or usurped whatever native birds (adults, or eggs or nestlings) that inhabited it. Thank goodness, this dangerous practice has come to an end.

Calculating the Number of Tree Swallow Fledglings

In 2012 we started recording the number of Tree Swallows fledged. Now we are able to calculate the number of Tree swallows fledged per pair.

Year	# of Tr. Sw. Fledglings	# of Pairs	Tr. Sw. Fledglings /Pair
2012	780	179	4.36
2013	578	119	4.86
2014	852	191	4.46
2015	630	140	4.50

Upcoming Events

Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society 's Annual General Meeting will be held at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington on Saturday, March 19, 2016. For more information, visit their website...www.oeps.ca

North American Bluebird Society 's Annual Convention will be at the Ellis Bird Farm in Lacombe, Alberta. It is a weekend convention, scheduled for July 8th, 9th and 10th. For more information visit the NABS' website...www.nabluebirdsociety.org



Van Ert Traps Available

- Call Don Bissonnette at 519- 738-3279.
\$20.17 + \$2.62 (HST) = \$22.79

Thank You

Thank you to TD Canada Trust's Friends of the Environment Foundation, for their contribution to our Bluebird Committee in April 2015.

Thank you to Cathy LaPain and Joann Grondin. These 2 participated in the Baillie Birdathon. A portion of their pledges was donated to the Bluebird Committee. Thank you to all of their sponsors!

"FIRSTS" for 2015

1st Redwing Blackbird was reported on Sunday, March 8th, on the Arner Townline (County Road #23) just south of Essex. (John Balga)

1st Kildeer: reported....a small flock of Kildeers was reported flying over Leamington on Tuesday, March 10th. (Don Bissonnette)

1st Wood-ducks...a pair of Woodies were on the Luchese Pond on Sunday, March 22. (Joan Affleck)

1st Bluebird Nest: discovered by Clairie and Marg Calder, on the Kelly Property on Tuesday, March 24

1st Tree Swallow was observed by Gilles Breton, in his backyard, near Woodslee, on Sunday, March 29th. The next day, John Balga and Shirley Michinski also reported Tree Swallows.

1st House Wren was heard singing at the Braithwaites' property on Saturday, May 2nd. (Don Bissonnette)

1st Baltimore Oriole was reported by Bob Tanner , at his home near Union, on Sunday, May 3. The 2nd oriole was reported a few later by Caroline Kopchuk. Caroline saw this bird at her South Windsor Home.

1st Hummingbird was reported by Dan Bissonnette, on Sunday, May 3 at his home near McGregor.

1st Orchard Oriole was reported on Tuesday, May 5th, by Bob Tanner at his home.

1st Nest of Bluebird Hatchlings was found at the Woodiwiss on Thursday, May 7. (Bob Tanner)

1st Tree Swallow Egg was reported at Vagi's also on Thursday, May 7.(Bob Tanner again!)

1st Nest of Tree Swallow Hatchlings... Don Bissonnette recorded 2 Tree Swallow Nests with recently hatched young on the Grosso Trail on May 27.

1st Budgie was reported by Paul Hamel. Throughout the Summer and the Fall, a Budgie was seen roaming Paul's neighborhood . It would occasionally be seen slipping into Paul's Birdhouses.

The 'Blue Roof' Birdhouse Project

Some Bluebirders have been painting the roof of their Birdhouses blue. Some are reporting that in some cases the House Sparrows will not use these Birdhouses. The native birds are then able to nest undisturbed. Some of us decided to give this 'Blue Roof' Project a try.



Peterson House with Blue Roof: Photo Courtesy of Don Bissonette

Case #1 ... Joan's Birdhouse

Joan had a birdhouse in the same location for almost ten years. It always hosted a pair of Tree Swallows. Unfortunately, it frequently had House sparrows move in. This always resulted in the Tree Swallows being usurped or killed.

In early April, Joan reported that both Tree Swallows and House Sparrows were staying close to this house. I cut a piece of 1/4" plywood the roof's dimensions, painted it blue, and attached it to

the top of Joan's Birdhouse roof.

The Results: The House Sparrows stayed at the House, building a nest and chasing the Tree Swallows. These House Sparrows were captured, using a Van Ert Trap and relocated. It turns out, that if a pair of House Sparrows is well bonded to the Birdhouse, then they won't be deterred by the addition of a 'Blue Roof' to their house.

Joan reported that a pair of Tree Swallows moved into this house soon after the House Sparrows were relocated.

Case#2...The Hanging Birdhouses

We had 2 hanging Birdhouses suspended by chains in Honey Locust trees, about 6 feet off the ground. These houses had hosted both Tree Swallows and Bluebirds in the past. Unfortunately, in the past few years these native birds were usurped by House Sparrows on a few occasions.

In late winter, I painted the rooves of these two Houses blue. When we rehung them in the trees, House Sparrows checked them out. Strangely, the House Sparrows **Never** sat on the blue rooves.

The Results: The House Sparrows still bonded with these Hanging Birdhouses. Although they avoided the roof, they did sit on the branches surrounding the Birdhouse. They built nests, and chased off any visiting native birds.

Case#3...Dan's Backyard

Dan has a large backyard with 2 Birdhouses. In early April, Dan reported that Tree Swallows, Bluebirds and House Sparrows were visiting his Birdhouses. Unfortunately, a House Sparrow pecked a Tree Swallow to death.

I went to Dan's on April 9th with a new Peterson Birdhouse with a blue roof. One of his Birdhouses was in good shape made of unstained, aged wood. The other Birdhouse was in bad shape, so we replaced it with the Blue Roof Birdhouse.

It's important to note that the Blue Roof Peterson was set in an open, stark area. There were no dense shrubs nearby where House Sparrows could hide.

The Results: The Tree Swallows and Bluebirds landed on the roof, happy with the new house. The blue roof provided some degree of camouflage for both species. The House Sparrows would not approach it! The House Sparrows stayed close to the old Birdhouse. A Van Ert Trap was installed in the old Birdhouse. Dan reported that 11 House Sparrows were captured and relocated at the old Birdhouse over a three day period.

I visited the site on April 12th and found that the Blue Roof Birdhouse contained a half-built Bluebird Nest! A pair of Tree Swallows sat steadfast on the Roof of the old Birdhouse. They were no longer in danger of being killed or chased off by the House Sparrows.

Dan reported that both the Bluebirds and the Tree Swallows had nests of 5 young each. The moment the Bluebird Young fledged, a new pair of Tree Swallows moved in, relined the nest and produced 3 fledglings.

I have a **Hypothesis** about the Blue Roof Bird House. When a male House Sparrow begins to bond with a Birdhouse, he sits for many hours on the Roof. He chirps to invite a female House Sparrow and repels any other male House Sparrows. Most traditional Birdhouse Roofs are some shade of brown which offer some camouflage to the dull coloured Male Sparrow. However, the House Sparrow has no camouflage on the blue roof. He would be a target to Accipiter Hawks.

Conversely, both Bluebirds and Tree Swallows have some degree of camouflage when sitting on a Blue roof. If these native birds sit on a traditional brown Birdhouse roof, they have no camouflage and are more likely to be spotted by a hungry Accipiter Hawk flying overhead.

Over the Winter I will build more Blue-roof Birdhouses. We will continue to experiment with them in the Spring.

Thanks to everyone involved in this labour of love. I hope all of you have a successful year with lots of Bluebirds and Tree Swallows.



Sincerely, Don Bissonette