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# LIVING

# Bluebirds are back

With its striking plumage and bubbly song, the eastern bluebird is a cherished sight for birders, country residents, and nest box aficionados alike. The good news is that the bluebird is back.



**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**  
Drew Monkman

The new Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, a five-year census of the province's breeding birds, shows a significant increase in bluebird numbers in all areas of Ontario. Compared to the first atlas, carried out between 1980 and 1985, there has been a 69-per-cent increase in the number of locations with breeding bluebirds. The major concentration of this species in Ontario is along the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, an area that includes most of the

Kawartha Lakes region.

Bluebird numbers had increased dramatically in the 19th century when settlers first cleared the forests, thereby creating the open habitat the bird requires. However, as a result of changing land use patterns, urbanization, pesticide use, and the effect of severe weather events, bluebird numbers slowly began to decrease. The introduction of the European starling and the house sparrow was especially harmful, since both of these species are quite aggressive and often out-compete the bluebirds for nesting sites.

Bluebird decline became especially severe in the late 1970s, mostly because of severe winters in the southeastern U.S. where most of the birds overwinter. By the end of the decade, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources had declared the bluebird to be rare.

Over the past two decades, however, a trend of generally warmer weather has allowed the birds to survive the winter more successfully and return to breed. Even more importantly, people all over eastern North America have been erecting and maintaining predator-proof bluebird nest boxes, thereby further helping the species to rebound from these earlier declines. However, highly volatile weather as a result of global warming will almost certainly result in a fluctuating bluebird population in the future.

A hardy species, the bluebird is one of nature's first offerings of colour and song in early spring. The average arrival date in the Kawarthas is March 26. Those that arrive too early, though, or are unfortunate enough to encounter a spring snow storm or cold snap, sometimes die huddled together in nest boxes.

Bluebirds are attracted to rural or semi-rural habitats with relatively short grass and suitable nesting cavities. These habitats often include agricultural areas adjacent to urban centers, fallow fields, grazed pastures, and orchards. The availability of insects, too, is a must.

Bluebirds usually have at least two broods, one beginning in late April, and a second beginning in mid-June. Courtship consists of the male bringing nesting material to the hole, going in and out several times, and then perching on the roof of the box where he flutters his half-opened wings in front of the female, spreads his tail, and warbles soft notes of affection. The female builds the nest entirely on her own and incubates the eggs. Both parents help with feeding the young.

Offspring from the second — and sometimes third — brood will often stay with their parents over the course of the late summer and fall. At first they are mostly seen in the vicinity of the nest site but will then range farther afield. They eat large numbers of grasshoppers and crickets at this time of year, dropping down from perches to catch the insects on or near the ground.

Later in fall and into the winter, small wild fruits such as dogwood, viburnum, and

*When it comes to capturing the human heart, few birds can compare*



Kelly Dodge, special to The Examiner  
A male bluebird (top photo) and a female bluebird feeding a fledgling.

winterberry holly become a larger part of their diet. The birds will often turn up along wetland margins and in fruit trees on farms or rural backyards.

Kelly Dodge, a well-known local wildlife artist, has observed bluebirds in her two nest boxes for several years now. She also regularly provides mealworms for them to eat. In fact, the birds sometimes come right up to the window to make it known they want to be fed. One year, she was lucky enough to be watching the day the babies left the box. The first four exited without

any problem and fluttered to a nearby bush. The fifth, however, came out of the hole backwards, and fell to the ground. Kelly placed the bird in a tree but quickly realized it couldn't perch properly because of a crippled toe. Ever the resourceful wildlife rescuer, she brought the fledgling inside and put it in a cockatiel cage. She then removed the top of the cage, set it outside and placed mealy worms on the ground. Sure enough, the parent bluebirds soon arrived, gathered up the mealworms, and actually entered the cage to feed the baby. After seven days of

this protein-rich diet, "Zippy" was able to fly and strong enough to better balance himself on perches. As far as Kelly knows, he departed with the rest of the birds in the fall.

Like robins, bluebirds have a flexible migration schedule. However, most will have left the Kawarthas by the end of October. They migrate west along the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie and on to the southeastern states and even Mexico. Sometimes the number of birds moving on a given day is quite impressive. For example, on October 27, 1991, 825 bluebirds were recorded migrating past Holiday Beach near Windsor.

Surprisingly enough, bluebirds are hardy enough to survive the winter in Ontario if there is an adequate crop of fruit available. For example, the 2002 Christmas Bird Count tallied 779 bluebirds in the province. Most were found inland from lakes Ontario and Erie. A small number usually remain in the Kawarthas, as well, until at least early December. They usually move around in small, loose flocks of five to 10 birds. It is expected that the number of overwintering bluebirds in our area will increase as our winters continue to become more mild.

The bluebird's size, shape, and habit of perching on telephone wires while scanning for food make the species quite distinctive and conspicuous. Another aid in finding them is, of course, the presence of nesting boxes. Even at this time of year, the birds are often still in the general vicinity of the boxes. Some of the concessions between Highway 7 and Rice Lake are particularly good for seeing bluebirds.

As already mentioned, nesting boxes have made a huge difference in the bluebirds upsurge in numbers. Nevertheless, deciding to put up a nesting box is a serious decision and is best done properly or not at all. The box must meet proper specifications, be placed in the proper location and be monitored; otherwise, it can be tantamount to simply ringing the dinner bell for predators.

House sparrows, raccoons and cats are the primary predators of nesting boxes. Surprisingly enough, the latter two can actually reach into a nest with their paw and scoop out whatever is inside — eggs, babies, and even adults. A suitable predator guard, however, will keep them out. All boxes should be mounted on 1 1/4-inch pipe poles or T posts — wood posts or trees should not be used. There are a number of different predator guards that can be attached to the pole below the box. Metal cone shaped guards are popular. Wooden guards over the entrance hole are not effective.

House sparrows can be a real challenge, too. They will kill the adult bluebirds and peck any eggs in the nest. To reduce the need to evict sparrows, try to locate the nesting boxes at least 300 metres (1,000 feet) from any barns or areas where house sparrows habitually nest.

The 1 1/2 inch entrance hole should be 1.8 metres (six feet) above the ground and face southeast. If you are erecting several boxes or a complete trail, they should be placed at least 92 metres (300 feet) apart. The boxes should be installed by March and monitored weekly. Checking during the egg laying stage usually will not scare away the adults if it's done carefully. It is important though to leave the box alone during the fledgling stage. For more detailed guidelines and construction notes on nesting boxes, visit <http://www.oeb.ca/>.

Erecting and properly monitoring bluebird boxes is one area where amateurs can still make a huge difference in the species success. There's something about seeing bluebirds, or, better still, having them set up home in one of your boxes, that makes you feel blessed. When it comes to capturing the human heart, few birds can compare.

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