

# BLUEBIRDS

## Annual Meeting

Our Annual General Meeting will be held Saturday, Oct. 29, at 2 p.m. in the Helen Schuler Nature Centre. Speakers, information about bluebirds, nest boxes and refreshments will all be part of the event. Anyone interested in bluebirds and learning more about them is welcome to attend.

## Need nest boxes?

Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society director Ken Mackintosh is the guy to call. There are limited numbers of boxes available. He can be reached at 403-345-5806.

## Trail Monitor form

If you are monitoring a trail, please ask for and fill out a Trail Monitor's Agreement form. It tells the MBTCS your identity, the location of your trail and ensures that the trail is being monitored and will continue to be monitored should any trails be given up by former monitors. This is a new method to keep better track of trails and protect bluebird nest box habitat.



## President's report

By Joe Michielson

Another bluebird year has come and gone. Steven Shumborski saw large flocks of bluebirds near his boxes in the foothills on Sept. 25, attesting that our work is helping the population.

It was an interesting nesting year with a very early start, which led to problems when a cold snap hit at the end of May. I checked my Tempest trail on May 17 and found chicks already seven or eight days old and by far the most chicks I had since I started monitoring in 2002.

When I checked the boxes on June 1, I found all but one of the nestlings that were hatched during my earlier visit had succumbed to the cold. Many of the boxes had new nests on top of the dead nestlings with eggs. I removed the dead birds and was happy to see most of the second brood fledge.

Another interesting event on my trails occurred in late summer when I returned to clean out my boxes. I found many of them had abandoned swallow eggs and a few had dead swallow nestlings. I presume a storm or storms had caused the adults to abandon the nests.



### Guess who?

Sometimes there are surprises inside bluebird nest boxes. MBTCS director Jim Leitch found this little guy, an immature weasel, inside one of his boxes this summer.

"He cleaned out a tree swallow family and then departed, I presume, a few days later," said Jim.



In my last report I mentioned we had a college student, Dustin Coldwell, working on building mapping with a data link for Mountain Bluebird Trail (MBT) nesting boxes. He has begun to contact all the monitors asking specific questions to complete the data set, which includes your contact information. It will be linked to the coordinates of each of your boxes. The second step will be a link to statistics of each box so we have a better handle on the success and other details of all of our boxes. This will minimize box losses and maximize information from each box on our trails.

Expect Dustin to call soon if he hasn't already done so. Please help him by providing him with all your info along with the GPS coordinates of your boxes if you've got them. He will be asking if you have the coordinates or will make arrangements to mark them this fall.

Ken Moore, Steven Shumborski, Jeannie Wishneski, and I attended the NABS Conference at the Ellis bird farm near Lacombe this summer. There were many interesting guest speakers highlighted by the Saturday evening keynote speaker, Brian Keating. If you have an opportunity while in the Lacombe area, go to the Ellis Farm. It is an extremely interesting conservation/bird farm. (Continued on next page)



With the 2016 bluebird nesting season over, it's time to clean out the nesting boxes and check their condition. It is also a great time to assess how many boxes need to be replaced and get some new ones from Ken Mackintosh.

If mice are common in your boxes, you may want to plug the hole for the winter. Remove it by April ready for the bluebirds' return.

Rick Swihart, Richard Crowe and Jim Leitch, along with help from a couple of friends, will be working hard again building boxes through the winter. The boxes they build are available from Ken M., so please do a count of the exact number you want to replace or add to your trails. We have material to build up to 500 boxes. Our builders are doing their best to construct them as time permits, following Goldie Weeks' construction procedures.

Again, we are asking members to only take boxes as they need them and can install before the next nesting season. They are now branded

with numbers on the boxes with the year they were built and then consecutively (eg 16-12). We expect all boxes to be GPS'd and installed the year they are received so we can map their location.

In the past we have lost track of many MBT boxes and have no way of determining how many exist and where they are located. People are reporting boxes all over southern Alberta in various states of disrepair. Our Trail Master has been trying to get all the boxes and trails mapped but we know many boxes and trails are not monitored.

Our Annual General Meeting is coming up on Oct. 29 at 2 p.m. at the Helen Schuler Nature Center. We have lined up a very interesting guest speaker so I hope you all can attend. Also Dustin Coldwell will be there to show his progress and plan. Hope to see you all at the AGM to share stories. Remember, it's a once a year event, so try to attend.



**Curious heifers check out a bluebird trail monitor who was visiting the nest box at left.**

# It's a jungle out there!

Mountain bluebirds have to contend with various threats, predators and competitors for nest boxes. Here are a few of the common — and not so common — threats to our bluebirds in this part of Alberta.



**Clockwise from above: rattlesnake (does not climb but one was found in a Saskatchewan bluebird box); black bear (will eat eggs, nestlings and destroy boxes); bull snake (will climb into boxes); deer mouse (may live in boxes, also carry hantavirus); coyote; tree swallow (not a predator, but does compete for nest boxes); rough-legged hawk (preys on adult bluebirds in migration); wren (no threat, but will also occupy bluebird boxes); and another photo of tree swallow nestlings. Raccoons and starlings (not pictured) can also invade bluebird boxes and eat eggs, young and adult bluebirds.**



# Gruesome damage done by bot flies

Summer of 2016 was a challenging and somewhat gruesome year for the monitors in the Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society (MBTCS).

After 10 healthy years, this summer we found blowfly (botfly) and were reminded of the importance of regular box monitoring.

Thanks to one of our newer members, Steven Shumborski, we have good information about the impact of the blowfly larvae and the mortality of young bluebirds. Here are some learnings to share.

1. The life cycle of the blowfly is FAST. Eggs laid by the adult fly take 18-21 hours to hatch. Larvae develop in two to four days and use nestlings as a food source. Within 8 to 10 days the pupa develops into an adult blowfly that will repeat the process. It is important to clean the boxes regularly.

2. Clean out the nest and ensure there is a better chance for a second brood. It is good practice to empty the infected nest (into a bag you can close and remove from the area) and replace it with a fresh grass nest. This requires planning to minimize disturbance to the nest/bluebird parents. Remove the nestlings to a temporary space; use soft grasses and leaves to form a new nest and return the nestlings.

3. On drop-down-floor nest boxes, lower the floor and gently rub the bottom of the nest material to get larvae and pupae to fall out. The nest will not be disturbed and most of the blowflies can be easily removed.

4. The use of chemicals/products is not recommended for the natural functioning of the life cycle, but knowing our goal is to support bluebird survival, there are two dusts that may help treat fly-infected nests.

Pyrethrum dust is a non-specific pesticide that will kill insects. If you use this, carefully follow directions on the label and insure you don't get any on the nestlings. This dust can also compound the problems that are already in the box.

Diatomaceous earth (available from a garden center) helps in a heavy infestation. If you are able to remove the nestlings, sprinkle this on the nest material and agitate to shake it in. Then return the eggs/nestlings to the box. These fine particles will stop the larvae but can also cause scarification on the skin of the nestling. Limit the amount used, as this dust is harmful to both you and the birds.

Our conclusions are: wear disposable gloves and keep boxes cleaned. Try to use non-artificial methods but follow labels if you choose to use chemicals or products. If you are lucky enough to have bottom opening boxes, (not all of them have this feature), leave them open over winter to prevent insects and predators from overwintering. Close the boxes again by March 1.

For boxes that don't open from the bottom, clean out the nests in fall and spray with a bleach/water solution to disinfect. Then hope for a better year in 2017. For more information, send a note through our website mail.

# What's in your BB monitor kit?

If you are new to bluebird trail monitoring, you may want to consider equipping yourself to handle the various situations you may encounter. Good shoes, gloves and a few tools can save you time and repeated trips to keep your trail in good shape for Mountain Bluebirds. Here is a list of items provided by MBTCS trail monitors. You may not need everything on this list, but these items have been useful to some monitors in the past.

Gloves, leather and nitrile rubber  
 Boots or shoes suitable for hiking  
 Rubber boots for wet weather  
 Disposable mask  
 Map of net box locations  
 County or M.D. map  
 Monitoring sheets to record activity in the nest box  
 Pencil or pen  
 Hammer, fencing staples to repair loose wires on the nest box post  
 Rags to plug entrance hole  
 Wood rasp for taking rough edges off entrance hole  
 Shovel to bury any dead birds  
 Duct tape  
 Plastic bags  
 Vise grips  
 Long flat screwdriver to clear material through corner holes on fixed floor boxes  
 Long scraper to clear droppings from walls  
 Spray bottle, 1 to 10 chlorine bleach solution to clean after removing deer mouse nests  
 Exterior wood glue to secure wooden ridge cap on old boxes  
 Extra box lids, plywood strip to secure lid on top of old boxes



**The MBTCS would like to thank the following for their donations, in funds, materials and/or labour, to its activities:**

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