



Dedicated to studying, conserving and helping restore the natural range
of the Mountain Bluebird in southern Alberta.

Welcome,

Why can't all winters be like that! Despite the constant wind, it was probably the mildest and driest winter that most of us can remember.

Even though the weather was quite bearable here, Shelley and I decided to take a little holiday down in Arizona for the month of February. I won't bore you with the details of how perfect the weather was, but we did run into some little blue friends from southern Alberta. That bright flash of blue was a welcome sight. It made us think it was spring, forgot the fact that bluebirds like to go south for the winter, also. Don't blame them one bit.

The Helen Schuler Nature Centre has always been a good partner for MBTCS. We learned recently that the centre will be undergoing a major renovation.

Opened in 1982, the centre is operated by the City of Lethbridge. In its first year of operation, over 8,500 people visited and took part in the programs. By 1984, more space was needed, so an additional programming room and offices were added. The Nature Centre has changed and grown with the community, and now receives more than 30,000 visitors each year!

The project consists of a renovation and an approximate 370 sq. m. expansion of the existing building. The project is scheduled for a spring 2014 completion and will provide the following features:

- A new fully accessible entrance, lobby area dedicated to volunteer and supporter recognition
- Additional indoor community meeting space to better meet the functional needs of user groups
- Gallery space to double the current exhibition space
- Provide additional meeting and programming rooms for community groups
- A fully accessible green roof
- Enlarged office and storage space
- Enhanced washroom facilities
- Upgrades to the building envelope, mechanical and electrical systems.

“Information Seminar/Banding Workshop”

Saturday, June 23, 2012

10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Fish & Game building

1001 9 Ave South

Lethbridge, AB

**Bring a lunch
Field trip in P.M.**

**RSVP: 317-1252-Gwen
345-5806-Ken**



Artist's rendering

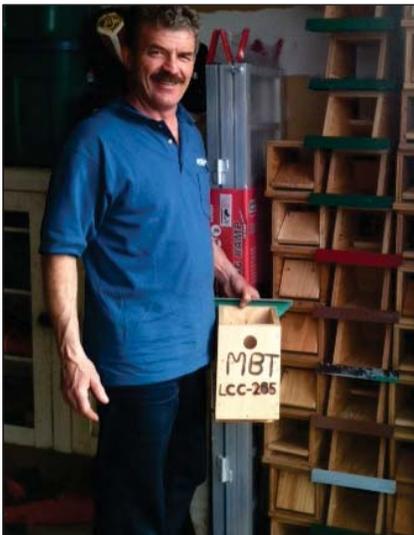
2012 Spring Banding & Monitoring Workshop

Saturday, June 23rd is the date for this year's Banding/General Information Workshop in Lethbridge (see box on page 1). Please call Gwen if you wish to assist with the event. This has been an overwhelming success over the years, so plan to attend, even just to socialize with your fellow members! Our membership has grown significantly and we now need some help getting to all the new volunteers. If you would like to mentor a new monitor or bander, please contact Gwen (403-317-1252).

This year we are going to be using a new format. The morning session will be "An Introduction to Bluebirds" - a general discussion on monitoring, nest placement, etc. In the afternoon, we will go out to an actual nest site for a hands-on introduction to banding. Food will not be provided, so bring your own lunch.



Contacting us for replacement boxes



Another season is about to start and it is time to clean, repair and replace a few of those nesting boxes. You can contact the following people to obtain new boxes:

Ken Mackintosh, Coaldale
(403) 345-5806

Joe Michielsen, Coaldale
(403) 345-4777

There is no charge to members for boxes. At left is Ken with a few of the many boxes available to members. Most of our boxes are now built by the "good" folks at the Lethbridge Correctional Centre. The Pincher Creek Co-op continues to donate plywood annually.

Mist Netting - Gwen Tietz

...What exactly is it?

A simple explanation is behind most everything one does, let's try and keep it simple. Upon responding to a volunteer calling through the Lethbridge Naturalist Society, I came to participate in the "MAPS" (Monitoring Avian Productivity & Survivorship) mist netting station, in Waterton Lakes National Park. Officially, this station is called the "Wishbone MAPS Station" and is the project of Cyndi Smith, a biologist at Waterton Lakes

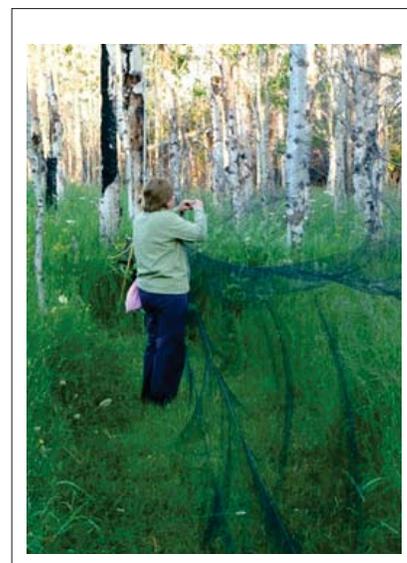


National Park. Through this brilliant biologist, I proceeded down the long path of learning techniques in bird identification, population studies & the like. Let's tackle describing where, what and how we do this.

Where The official Wishbone MAPS site is just east of the Maskinonge wetlands, northeast of the Waterton townsite inside Waterton Lakes National Park. This has proven to be a site that has produced both migrating and local breeding birds in the area. 2012 will be the 11th year for this site and is has been quite interesting and diverse to watch the statistics gathered. The first few years the species captured were much the same with a few "grand" exceptions added to the list. Then in 2009 Parks Canada chose the site as a prescribed burn area. Wow did that have an impact! It was a positive impact that proved that a "natural" burn would offer some species a

chance to flourish while others that were previously in abundance moved on. Now we catch several wonderful woodpeckers in higher numbers, this is great when one is brushing up on "aging techniques".

Aging Techniques ... Wrap your head around this one....with intense training and practise with a pile of "experts" I have come to learn how to age a bird by the sequence of feathers replaced through the life of a bird....huh? Did you know that each species of birds drops each feather at certain times in its life? A perfect example to witness is a woodpecker ...based on the sequence replaced on the wing you can conclude what we call a first, second or over third year bird. Yup, pretty cool indeed. Did you also know that we can see evidence of food availability just by witnessing "growth bars" or dark lines on the feathers? So...why does that all matter? Well...we can tell if birds have adequate food on the wintering grounds or breeding grounds throughout their life. Does this matter? You bet! We can conclude if a first, second or over third year bird has the potential to survive to produce the next generation.



Methods of Mist Netting ... One must be half insane to get up at least an hour before sunrise, drag oneself to the site, pray the wind will subside and put up the "gear". The gear at this station is 10 nets, raised on conduit poles to 10 feet and approximately 20 feet long. These are called net lanes that are chosen at the time of site commencement. For data consistency these same ones must be used every year until the site is closed. New "lanes" can be used if original ones are replaced, but 10 nets are always present. For a period of 6 hours, frequency of 20-30 minutes, the "extractors" must circle the nets and carefully remove each bird, place it in a bag and take it back to the banding table/station to be "processed by the "BIC". The "Bander In Charge" removes the bird from the bag and records the wing length, presence of body fat, proof of nesting females, sexes the bird, age, using feather patterns and finally the weight.

Mist Netting

Data Usage ... All data is forwarded back to “MAPS” program administrative collection team. Have a look at “<http://www.birdpop.org/maps.htm>” to see more details on this effort. The data is also forwarded to the Canadian Wildlife Service, part of the North American bird banding effort with the US Bird Banding Lab. It is important to remember that birds are what we call an “indicator species” that can dictate what may be happening to our environment through all this data we collect.



It can tell us a few things like if populations are declining due to lack of food either up here on the breeding ground or down on the wintering grounds. What are they eating

can even be determined by isotope studies done by clipping one small feather and checking for chemical signature of food consumed.

SO COOL! ... Yes, I've caught the bug on this “mist netting” thing. I have been ever so lucky to participate in workshops held by the Canadian Wildlife Service with Peter Pyle as the facilitator. That fellow actually wrote the manuals we use to age each bird using “molt patterns” on the birds. Wow, there is a brilliant person! I have also joined quite a wonderful group in Calgary known as the “Calgary Bird Banding Society”. In 2008 I was privileged to accompany them to Costa Rica on the Osa Peninsula to a mist netting site down there. And in early May of this year I will return with them to another site...darn, someone has to go, lucky me! Apparently down on that site we run 17 nets, tiring but ever so rewarding work. Also with CBBS I have been to other banding sites including Dinosaur Provincial Park and Cypress Hills Provincial Park.

Your help is needed! ... If you can possibly donate to the Calgary Bird Banding Society please do. Without this group done entirely by volunteers we could not produce this valuable information. Visit “<http://www.calgarybirdbandingsociety.org/>” to witness

their valuable programs. Or, donate to Mountain Bluebird Trails Conservation Society. They are also volunteer based and always need funds to replace boxes. Also visit them at “<http://www.bluebirdtrails.org/>” as they too have an effort worthy of your time. Please donate to a “birding group” as almost all of them are driven by passionate volunteers that need funds to continue. Remember “think global...act local”, it really does make a difference!



Tools of the trade.

Gwen Tietz - Master Bander, Sec./Tres. - MBTCS
- Director - North American Bluebird Society

Tree Swallows - Friend or Foe?

Tree swallows are energetic and familiar backyard songbirds. Like all swallows, Tree swallows are slender with streamlined bodies, short necks, very short legs and tiny feet. Their long pointed wings enable them to fly with amazing agility. They have small bills but, like most birds that catch insects while in flight, their mouths can open surprisingly wide. Adult male and older female tree swallows can be easily identified by their iridescent blue-green backs and white bellies. Yearling females are brownish.

Tree swallows prefer to nest near or in wetlands, such as marshes, swamps, beaver ponds, and wet meadows. These wetlands are usually open for easy flight and have lots of the flying insects tree swallows need to feed themselves and their young. Perhaps most important, wetlands often have nest sites tree swallows need.



Tree swallows are found throughout Alberta and breed throughout central and northern North America. They spend their winter in Florida, along the Gulf of Mexico and south to the Caribbean and Central America. Tree swallows winter farther north than any other American swallow species, and they return to their nesting grounds in mid-April, long before other swallows come back. Most tree swallows leave for their wintering grounds by mid-August.

Tree swallows are cavity-nesters. They nest inside holes in trees. However, Tree swallows are unable to dig their own nest cavities. Under natural conditions they must find an old woodpecker hole or a cavity in a dead tree, or a nest box

Bluebirds and tree swallows have competed for nesting sites since the beginning of time. Bluebirds are larger than tree swallows in every physical aspect but wingspread and are very capable of defending their nests. Even though they don't need it, some have suggested 'helping' our bluebirds by 'eliminating the competition'. This, of course, is frowned upon by conservationists. That would be us. Others have suggested doubling nest boxes - placing 2 closed together, sometimes on the same fence post. Since tree swallows seldom allow another pair of swallows to nest within 20', the second box is free for bluebird use and the two species can co-exist, after some initial squabbling to sort out who gets which box. Remember that if you use pairing to reduce competition between bluebirds and tree swallows, bluebird spacing requirements still apply. Each pair of boxes should still be 300' or more from the next pair or the purpose of pairing is defeated.



Bluebird and tree swallows can co-exist despite appearances to the contrary. As anyone who's been outside on a cool summer's evening can attest, there are plenty of insects to go around. Who knows, perhaps one day our research will show that they are actually good for each other.

Hello Little Bluebird

- Bill Sanders -

Hello little bluebird.
Don't be so shy.
I'm the one; your protector guy.
I'm the one that built your boxes,
Hung them high, away from foxes.
When the sun got blistering hot,
I drilled more vents to make it not.
When the bear came and wrecked your home,
I mourned too. You weren't alone.
You know the birdbath that you love so well,
The guy that maintains it does also here dwell.
The berries and cherries and lawns are maintained
Just for your pleasure, so do not disdain.
So don't be so shy and give us a good look.
You're more beautiful in person, than in any old book.



DID YOU KNOW...

The ***Peregrine Falcon***, once thought to be on the brink of extinction, is making a remarkable recovery. The 19 accepted subspecies are now found worldwide. In many parts of the world, Peregrine Falcons have adapted to urban habitats, nesting on cathedrals, skyscraper window ledges, tower blocks, and the towers of suspension bridges. Many of these nesting birds are encouraged, sometimes gathering media attention and are often monitored by cameras.



The Peregrine is renowned for its speed, reaching over 322 km/h (200 mph) during its characteristic hunting stoop (high speed dive), making it the fastest member of the animal kingdom. The air pressure from such a high speed dive could possibly damage a bird's lungs, but small bony tubercles on a falcon's nostrils guide the powerful airflow away from the nostrils. This allows the bird to breathe more easily while diving by reducing the change in air pressure. To protect their eyes, the falcons use nictitating membranes (third eyelids) to spread tears and clear debris from their eyes while maintaining vision.



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of the Mountain Bluebird in southern Alberta.

Greetings to my fellow bluebirders!

Wow! It has been another strange year, the weather was not the grandest in the spring and then it has been a wonderful August and late fall. Most reports that have come in have made note that there has not been many second broods to speak of. For the first time in many years (over 16) this newsletter will not be accompanied by the annual stats as I am still waiting for quite a few trail summaries as well as 3 banders report remittances. I have until the last day of October to get the information to the banding office so please get your paperwork in. My apology for not "getting" on this issue, I have been away at two Bluebird conferences late this fall.

September 20-23, St Regis Montana: The annual Montana Bluebird Society was in the small town of St Regis, north and west of Missoula. What a great time as usual! The drive was just amazing through "Big Sky" country, through deep canyons and into mountainous terrain. A field trip to the historic Savenac Nursery, the site is now closed as a nursery but used for educational purposes. The interpreter gave a complete story on the 1910 fires that burned out over 3 million acres in Idaho and Montana. These meetings are rarely attended by members of our group that is a shame as these folks know how to have a great AGM. I know we plan to return to that area as there is world class fly fishing rivers and other activities like biking through the mountains on abandoned rail tunnels...just ran out of time really.

October 4-6, Anaheim California: The southern California Bluebird Club hosted the annual NABS conference. Another wow! The speakers were pretty amazing including a biologist who spoke on all cavity nesters. A field trip on pontoon boats to a closed inner harbor of Newport Beach provided me with a few life birds like the Clapper Rail and the wonderful western bluebird...too cool (not to mention passing some whopper houses belonging to noted stars like John Wayne and Nicolas Cage). And a note on "NABS"... long thought of as the "eastern bluebird" organization...not so! NABS (North American Bluebird Society) should be considered the umbrella uniting all "Bluebird Affiliates". As a member one can monitor the activities of all bluebirders alike regardless of the location. You can get more information at www.nabluebirdsociety.org. This group sponsors many educational media with grants, do check it out. I have served on the board for almost a year now; recently I have accepted the treasurer position.

Well, winter will set in soon...I know that the bluebird will return next spring like clockwork...I can hardly wait. All the best to the monitors and banders who continue to work for MBT. I hope to see some of you at the AGM in late October.

Gwen Tietz, Sec/Treas. - MBTCS, Treas. - North American Bluebird Society (NABS)

***"Annual
General
Meeting"***

Saturday, Oct 27th, 2012

@ 2:00 p.m.

***Fish & Game building
1001 9 Ave South
Lethbridge, AB***

***\$10 fee (lunch &
refreshments)
Limited Seating!
Mentors needed!***

***RSVP: 317-1252 (Gwen)
345-5806 (Ken)***

Keeping in Touch

Saturday, October 27th is the date for this year's Annual General Meeting (AGM). This is a good time to discuss bluebird related issues and re-acquaint yourself with some of the other local bluebirders.

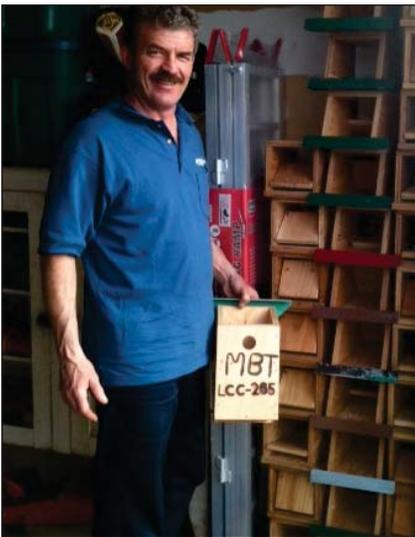
If you would like to mentor a new monitor or bander, please contact Gwen (403-317-1252).

Keeping track of a large group such as we are can be challenging at times. People move, sometimes right out of the area, they change email address or get new ones. Since we moved to the email system of communicating with our membership, we have saved a lot of time and money. But we still get emails and regular mail returned. If you change your email address, please let us know. If you move out of the area and need to give up your trail, please let us know. This is the most important reason. We have monitors eagerly waiting for a trail of their own. The following trails are now available:

- North and west of Pearce (east of Fort Macleod), on the south side of the Oldman River. We have GPS coordinates.
- North of Cowley, across the Oldman Dam. We have GPS coordinates.
- North of Cowley, across the Oldman Dam. Unmapped
- Beaver Mines area, Buckhorn Ranch Road. Unmapped. Call Gerry if you're interested 403-32-0120.



Contacting us for replacement boxes



We still have a good supply of bluebird boxes available. They are free to our members, others can purchase them at \$20 each. If you would like to pick up a few, we will have some available at the AGM. Otherwise, you can contact the following people to obtain new boxes:

Ken Mackintosh, Coaldale
(403) 345-5806

Joe Michielsen, Coaldale
(403) 308-0692

Remember, there is no charge to members for boxes. At left is Ken with a few of the many boxes available. Most of our boxes are now built by the "good" folks at the Lethbridge Correctional Centre. The Pincher Creek Co-op continues to donate plywood annually.

The Plight of the Sage Grouse

The largest of all North American grouse, the sage grouse depends almost entirely on sagebrush (*Artemisia* species) and the sagebrush/grassland community for food and cover. This grouse likely winters within or near its summer range.

In spring, groups of sage grouse gather at traditional courtship "leks" or dancing grounds. The males inflate air sacs at their upper chests, puff out their white chest feathers, spread their pointed tail feathers and strut—snorting, grunting, hooting and booming as they go—to intimidate other males and attract females.

But the sage grouse is in trouble.

History

In Alberta, the sage grouse is now found only in the extreme southeast corner of the province, east of Milk River and south of Cypress Hills. Its habitat consists primarily of sagebrush flats, that exist only in the shortgrass prairie. Sage grouse once occupied 49 000 km² of sagebrush habitat in southeastern Alberta. Much of that historical habitat has been lost and by 1968, the sage grouse sagebrush habitat had decreased to about 4000 km². The sage grouse population has declined drastically over the past several decades with decreases of (80% between 1968 and 1997; 50% in the last decade). As of the spring of 2001, there were only 108 males actively dancing at 8 active leks and the total spring population of sage grouse in Alberta is estimated at fewer than 500 birds. There does not appear to be any influx of birds from any surrounding populations.

Management

The sage grouse has been designated as an "endangered species" under Alberta's Wildlife Act. It is illegal to hunt or harm this grouse, or disturb its nests in Alberta at any time. The status of sage grouse in Alberta depends upon the quantity and quality of grasslands/sagebrush cover and the availability of food resources within that cover. The breeding success of these birds may be adversely affected by oil and gas development activities, road construction, power lines, and overgrazing or disturbance by cattle at lek sites. An interprovincial sage grouse recovery team consisting of several stakeholders was formed in 1997. This team has completed a Sage Grouse Recovery Strategy that has been submitted to the Minister of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Further work is being done by the sage grouse recovery team members to develop a sage grouse recovery action plan. In addition population monitoring, research into factors such as habitat selection and use, and population dynamics will support the recovery planning effort.

In the meantime, work is ongoing in an effort to enhance sage grouse production and survival. Sage grouse leks and adjacent nesting areas on public land are being protected. Most leks are on crown land and conservation and management will take place through regulations and negotiation with disposition holds. Some restrictions on public access to lek sites during breeding and nesting periods is being considered.



Infertile Bluebird Eggs

Like most species, bluebirds, may be infertile. I encountered a nest on my trail with eggs which at first I thought might not have been laid by a bluebird. They were a very pale light blue and one end was translucent. The shape was rounder than most bluebird eggs I've seen (pictures) but I had seen variations in the oval-shaped eggs. I went back a week or so later and the female bluebird was on the nest with more eggs all of which had the same – translucent end and were a pale light blue. Later, last summer, when I was monitoring my trail again, the same female (I had banded her) was still on the nest attempting to hatch out the eggs. I was able to see into the translucent ends of the eggs enough to know the chicks were not developing. I don't know if the eggs from this female were infertile from natural or manmade conditions e.g. the thin shells experienced when DDT was used in the past to control pests. This was the only nest on my trail that I witnessed this situation.

Report by Joe Michielsen, MBTCS Director



DID YOU KNOW...

*The **Atlantic Puffin** is a seabird species in the auk family. It is a pelagic bird that feeds primarily by diving for fish, but also eats other sea creatures, such as squid and crustaceans. Also known as the **Common Puffin**, it is the only puffin species which is found in the Atlantic Ocean. The curious appearance of the bird, with its large colourful bill and its striking piebald plumage are acquired in the spring, giving rise to nicknames such as "clown of the ocean" and "sea parrot". At the close of the breeding season, these special coatings and appendages drop off in a molt. Feeding areas are often located 100 km (60 mi) or more, offshore from the nest sites — although when provisioning young the birds venture out only half that distance. Atlantic Puffins can dive to depths of up to 70 m (200 ft) and are propelled through the water by their powerful wings, which are adapted for swimming; the webbed feet are used as a rudder while submerged. When hunting, Puffins may collect several small fish, such as herring, sprats and sand eels, zooplankton, crustaceans and mollusks. The tongue is used to hold the fish against spines in the palate, leaving the bill free to open to catch more fish. The fish, which may number up to twelve, are held in the bill with the heads facing in alternate directions. After the breeding season, Puffins head back out to sea where they will remain until the next spring.*

