

Eastern bluebird deserves second chance

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Correspondent

Now that the calendar has flipped past summer and into the months of autumn, it might be a good time to review the current status of the eastern bluebird in Ontario.

Long a traditional favorite with the early settlers, the blue robin, as they called it, gradually fell to the status of a rare bird by the mid-1950s. Though the reasons for the loss of the beloved harbinger of spring are generally well known, it's important in our heyday of modern living that they be repeated.

The convenience of blaming our contemporary ways of living for the bluebird's decline must be tempered with the bird's normal life patterns. In many instances the real problems arose when the two became entwined. For example, historically the bluebird suffered periodic heavy losses from late winter storms during its early migration flights.

With an adequate supply of natural nesting cavities, the population would generally recover in the space of a few seasons. However, when modern farming methods replaced wooden posts with those of steel, and removed the dead trees in the hedgerows, it eliminated many of the bluebird's nesting sites.

Further competition for the remaining cavities was unwittingly provided by the introduction of two alien species, the house sparrow and the starling. The belligerent nature of these two European birds, plus the fact that they were often non-migratory, meant the bluebirds often lost their opportunity to reproduce.

Also, the introduction and widespread use of persistent chemicals like DDT in the years that followed World War II cut a devastating swath through the ranks of the remaining bluebirds.

Truly a thrush by classification and a ground feeder by habit, these sky-backed birds with the earth-toned breast vanished in the space of a few seasons from most of their former haunts.

Bird columnist Hugh Halliday wrote in the Toronto Star in 1958, "So long, Mr. Bluebird, our modern ways leave no room for you." Similarly in May, 1960, Fred T. Hall, director of the Buffalo Museum, addressing the St. Catharines Game and Fish Association, said: "I'm sorry to say, the eastern bluebird must be considered as written off in the Niagara frontier and upper New York state." Records of the Kingston Field Naturalists indicate that only three bluebirds were found in the entire Kingston region in 1958.

From its unenviable status as a rare bird, the eastern bluebird has made a slow but steady return to some sections of its former range. This recovery is due without question to the many nest-boxes that have been erected for them by people of all walks of life.

Many are dedicated bluebird trail operators who each season monitor and maintain hundreds of boxes that produce the nucleus of our present-day bluebird population. Just as important are the countless concerned individuals who place several bluebird nest-boxes on the fence lines of their rural property or nearby country churchyards.

Hopefully, the time is gone when it took three years and over 300 nest-boxes to get a single pair

of nesting bluebirds. Thinking counted on the fingers of one back to those days in the late 1950s and early 1960s our success rate per 500 units could be

nestings in 520 boxes in the Brantford area. Near Kleinburg, where bluebirds have been scarce for many years, over two dozen young were fledged this season. Such reports show that we can have bluebirds in Ontario if we really want them.

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