



A male mountain bluebird. Photo credit: Lorne Scott

MY LIFE WITH BLUEBIRDS

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I was born in Indian Head, Saskatchewan and raised on a mixed farm south of town in the Aspen Parkland region of the province.

When my grandparents settled on the farm 100 years ago in 1915, the aspen bluffs were much smaller in size and maturity, as frequent prairie fires prevented the trees from getting well established. However, with settlement and cultivation, widespread grass fires were greatly reduced, allowing the aspens, willows and other shrubs to become established and reach maturity within a few decades. Aspen poplar, sometimes called “the walking tree,” spread by new saplings growing up and out from the existing bluff. The ability for aspens to spread is clearly evident where whole parcels of land that have never been broke are now

pretty well covered by an aspen forest.

Fifty years ago and beyond, farming was much more in harmony with nature. The aspen bluffs, shrubs, wetlands and fragmented remains of native grass interspersed by cultivated fields provided a rich and diverse landscape. The existing bluffs and wetlands were left untouched as open grassy areas were plowed for the growing of crops. Bluffs provided fire wood and fence posts, and the sloughs (wetlands) provided hay for winter feed and grazing, as did the remaining patches of grasslands. Winter brought daily chores and the harvesting of furs such as weasel, muskrat, rabbit and coyote.

Each season brought its own sights and sounds on the farm. Spring saw the return of many birds, some of which stayed to nest. Summer brought an array of wild flowers, such as cowslips (Hoary Pucoons) growing along well-worn paths followed by the cows coming home for the twice-daily milking. Fall was harvest time for garden produce, field crops and wild game.

Historically, both eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) and mountain bluebirds (*S. currucoides*) were relatively uncommon at Indian Head and in the vicinity of the Qu’Appelle Valley. The lack of nesting sites available prior to 1940 no doubt limited their numbers. In Manley Callin’s book, *Birds of the Qu’Appelle 1857 - 1979*, observations of both bluebird species are documented as rare, irregular and a relative new comer prior to 1940.

The early homesteads and equipment often contained nooks and crannies suitable for bluebird nesting sites, and it was considered a good omen to have bluebirds nesting close to one’s home. Perhaps the most frequently used bluebird nesting site was the twine box on the

old binder used for cutting sheaves. By 1950, the arrival of non-native and aggressive house sparrows and European starlings began to take over bluebird nesting sites. Remaining bluebirds were driven away from farm yards, and nested in woodpecker holes and rotted aspen snags.

My first recollection of bluebirds was around 1960, before I kept records. A pair of mountain bluebirds was nesting in the twine box on the binder, and as I went near their nest, they would dive bomb me in an attempt to scare me away — and it worked. My first recorded observation of mountain bluebirds was on April 11, 1963. Since then, I have recorded the spring arrival dates of the first bluebirds each year. The earliest spring arrival was February 22, 2000. A lone male was seen by my Uncle Hartley Scott and friend, Cliff Kenney, on the outskirts of Indian Head. I saw my first single male on March 4 that year. The latest arrival date documented was April 13, 1975.

It was recognized that bluebirds would use nesting boxes, and over the years people across North America built tens of thousands of boxes for all three species of bluebirds. Dr. T.E. Musselman of Illinois is credited as being the first person to set out a number of nest boxes along a country road side. Thus, in 1934, the concept of a “Bluebird Trail” was established.

In Canada, John and Nora Lane at Brandon, Manitoba formed the Brandon Junior Birders in 1959 and subsequently set out thousands of bluebird nest boxes. Over the next few decades eastern, mountain and western bluebirds (*S. mexicana*) all benefited from the efforts of dedicated individuals and organizations. Bluebird numbers increased substantially in those

Number of mountain bluebirds, eastern bluebirds and tree swallows banded from 1969 to 2015.

YEAR	MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS	EASTERN BLUEBIRDS	TREE SWALLOWS
1969	395	5	600
1970	601		849
1971	700		1450
1972	684		1396
1973	682	15	1794
1974	900		1698
1975	792	7	2299
1976	169		2
1977	243	5	179
1978	262		515
1979	136		300
1980	147		38
1981	189		4
1982			
1983			
1984			
1985	76		152
1986	48	4	144
1987	23		166
1988	166	9	70
1989	126	5	
1990	179		
1991	192	4	
1992	116	4	
1993	194		9
1994	190		77
1995	152	2	78
1996	73		117
1997	43		147
1998	94	6	36
1999	54		89
2000	131	4	178
2001	26		235
2002	40		124
2003	39		212
2004	51		137
2005	16		188
2006	110		181
2007	76		176
2008	62		138
2009	32		183
2010	10		209
2011	6		216
2012	9		208
2013	3		259
2014	6		310
2015			322
TOTAL	8,243	70	15,545



Male mountain bluebird bringing food to young in a twine box on an old binder. Photo credit: Myrna Pearman

areas where bluebird trails were established across North America.

I made my first nest box in 1963 at the age of 15. My first boxes were placed around the farm yard and I was quite happy to have house sparrows occupy them. As I recall, the sparrow population was higher back then than it is today.

In 1965, I placed some boxes along fence lines out in the fields away from the yard. May 24, 1965 was one of the most thrilling days of my life when I discovered a pair of mountain bluebirds using one of my nest boxes. The excitement was short-lived as a few days later, a road construction crew removed the post and box and left them laying on the ground. A second pair of mountain bluebirds was discovered in a box on June 21, but a domestic cat destroyed the nest and young. At last, on July 10, a pair of bluebirds raised five young in a third box. I also found two pairs of bluebirds nesting in old woodpecker holes in aspen trees that summer.

An additional 60 nest boxes, mostly made from hollow trees, were set out in 1966 along road sides and neighbours' fence lines. Six pairs of mountain bluebirds and two pairs of eastern bluebirds successfully nested. I had access to scrap lumber from a construction site and had some 200 nest boxes ready to set out in the

spring of 1967. At least 19 pairs of mountain bluebirds nested in them.

On May 1, 1967, I began to work at the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History (Royal Saskatchewan Museum). The following winter, I was given permission to use the carpenter shop at the Museum after hours to build nest boxes, if I supplied the lumber. About 200 nest boxes were ready to set out in the spring. I joined my bluebird trail at Broadview, Saskatchewan where it connected with John Lane's trail from Brandon, Manitoba. At least 50 pairs of mountain bluebirds nested in my boxes in 1968.

In 1969, I had obtained my own federal Bird Banding Permit, thanks to the references from renowned bird bander, Dr. Stuart Houston, and long-time naturalist and Western Producer columnist, Doug Gilroy. More than 100 pairs of mountain bluebirds and two pairs of eastern bluebirds nested that year, with 395 mountain and five eastern bluebirds being banded.

On April 5 of the following year, I joined my bluebird trail at Raymore, Saskatchewan, with the Saskatoon Junior Naturalists' trail led by Stuart and Mary Houston. This addition completed the longest bluebird trail in the world, with John and Nora Lane's trail based in Brandon extending from near Winnipeg,

west to Broadview, and my trail joining their trail at Broadview and extending west to Raymore, where it linked up with the Saskatoon Junior Naturalists' trail. The Junior Naturalists' trail extended westward from Saskatoon towards North Battleford, Saskatchewan.

During the 1970s, which was the peak operation of this longest bluebird trail in the world, thousands of nest boxes were spread over many hundreds of miles. It is estimated that 5,000 mountain bluebirds and 10,000 tree swallows fledged each year from this trail. For various reasons, the trail eventually fell into disrepair and no longer exists as it once did. However, many other individuals picked up the challenge and have placed thousands of nest boxes throughout Saskatchewan and the prairie provinces in an effort to assist bluebirds.

By 1975, I had made and placed some 2,000 nest boxes along many miles of road. I would check all the boxes four times a year, each trip covering 800 kilometres (500 miles) and taking four days to complete. The first trip was to record and band nesting bluebird females. On the second trip, young bluebirds and nesting adult female tree swallows were banded. Trip number three was to band young Tree Swallows. A final trip in the fall was made to clean out the boxes.

Big changes occurred in 1976, when I opted to move to my uncle and aunt's farm to do my own



All photos: Lorne Scott

farming along with continued employment as the Park Naturalist at Wascana Centre Authority in Regina, which made for a 160-kilometre round-trip daily commute. I also got married that year. Needless to say, priorities dictated that I would not be able to maintain all my nest boxes. Fortunately, volunteers monitored and maintained portions of my trail

and added their own nest boxes. By the late 1970s, changes were evident on the landscape as aspen bluffs and natural grasslands were being increasingly cleared and plowed under. Raccoons had arrived and became a new predator that bluebirds and trail operators had to contend with. I found that in the early 1980s, these intelligent animals

FIRST OBSERVED ARRIVAL DATES OF MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS BETWEEN 1963 AND 2015:

			1970	March	27	1980	March	25	1990	March	3	2000	February	22	2010	March	13
			1971	March	13	1981	March	3	1991	March	19	2001	March	17	2011	March	18
			1972	March	11	1982	March	16	1992	March	12	2002	March	30	2012	March	10
1963	April	11	1973	March	4	1983	March	29	1993	March	22	2003	March	29	2013	March	29
1964	April	1	1974	April	9	1984	March	26	1994	March	13	2004	March	23	2014	April	5
1965	April	8	1975	April	13	1985	March	14	1995	March	14	2005	March	27	2015	March	30
1966	March	12	1976	March	22	1986	March	13	1996	April	8	2006	March	28			
1967	March	23	1977	March	17	1987	March	27	1997	March	22	2007	March	11			
1968	March	5	1978	March	25	1988	March	2	1998	March	25	2008	March	16			
1969	March	23	1979	March	16	1989	March	25	1999	March	14	2009	March	20			

would sometimes retrace my steps to each nest box where they would feed on nesting females, eggs and young. Because of their predation, I chose not to visit or band any bluebirds or swallows between 1982 and 1984.

In an attempt to reduce raccoon predation, boxes are now retrofitted with a wire mesh raccoon guard around the entrance. The guards work with some success. These strong predators are sometimes able to rip apart older nest boxes in order to get at the contents inside.

Over the past 30 years, I have continued to maintain, monitor and band birds in boxes around the farm and nearby areas. A friend also maintains a short trail nearby where we continue to band bluebirds. Unfortunately, the number of mountain bluebirds nesting on the farm has declined over the past 20 years. This decline is puzzling, because my farm is one of the few places where the natural landscape has been preserved and the number of available nest boxes has actually increased. It appears to me that the bluebirds are simply not returning in the spring.

During the peak years in the 1970s, 25 to 30 pairs of mountain bluebirds nested on the farm each year, and the numbers were still fairly good in the 1980s. However, there was evidence of decline in the 1990s. The following information is a sobering reality: In 2008, 10 pairs nested on the farm. In 2009, six pairs nested. Only three pairs nested in 2010. Two pairs nested in 2011 and again in 2012. One pair fledged three young in 2013. One pair nested in 2014 and a raccoon ripped open the nest box devouring the young. For the first time in 50 years, no bluebirds nested on the farm in 2015.

The numbers of mountain bluebirds observed in the spring has also declined significantly. In 2015,



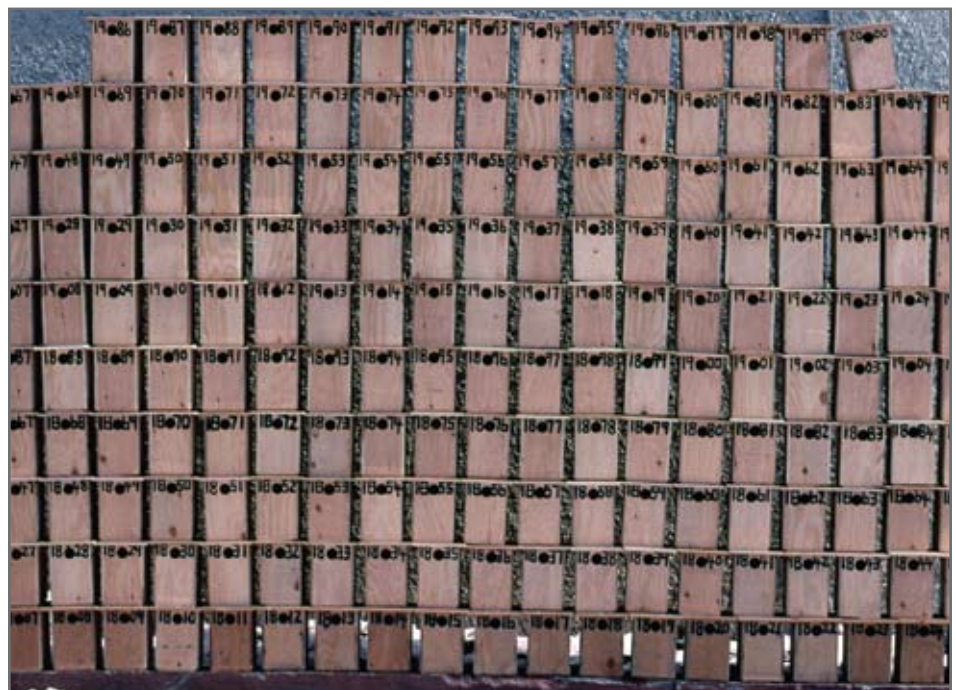
Male eastern bluebird. Photo credit: Fred Lahman

I visited familiar bluebird migration haunts several times looking for these harbingers of spring. I finally saw a lone female on March 30 and a lone male later in April.

Other bluebird trail operators in Saskatchewan have also noted a big decline in the number of nesting bluebirds. Myrna Pearman at the Ellis Bird Farm near Red Deer, Alberta has also noted a significant decline in nesting mountain bluebirds in the area northeast of Red Deer. Ironically, they seem to have increased in other

local areas, such as the Lousana area southeast of Red Deer. The cause of the decline is likely due to a number of factors including late spring snow storms, habitat loss and food supply.

Each year I set out a few more nest boxes on the farm and the natural habitat will be protected in perpetuity through a Conservation Easement with the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation. I will eagerly be looking for the first bluebirds arriving on a mild south breeze in March. Maybe a few will return to nest? 🐦



Some 200 nest boxes built over winter and ready to set out in early spring. Photo credit: Lorne Scott