

EASTERN BLUEBIRDS AT PRINCE ALBERT NATIONAL PARK IN 2011

MAURICE (Moe) and MARGARET (Marg) MARESCHAL

Birch Hills, SK

On 19 June, 2011, Bill and Lois Lang of Calgary, AB were on their last day of a two week photography and birding trip to Prince Albert National Park (PANP) they made an amazing discovery. On this day they happened upon a male Eastern Bluebird (EABL) in the fire-break just off highway 263 on the opposite side of the road from the Waskesiu Golf Course. At that time, Bill photographed the male with insects in it's mouth while the bird sat on a 6 meter snag. Near the top of the snag was a woodpecker hole of a size a Downy Woodpecker would have excavated.

The male transferred the insects to the female who briefly stuck her head out of the hole, she disappeared inside while the male again went out hunting. Subsequently, the Langs left to report the sighting at the Parks Canada Administration building in the Waskesiu townsite. Not long after making that report, Lois sent the message out to the birding community. A day later, my wife Marg and I left for our cabin at Waskesiu. Our intent: to monitor the location and activity around what was likely the most northern nest site ever reported for Eastern Bluebirds. Over the next four weeks we made four trips back and forth from our home near Birch Hills.

Data and Field observations:

20 JUNE 2011 – During a brief lull in the rain, we found the male bluebird but not the nest hole.

22 JUNE 2011 – Cloudy but no rain.
-- 06:00 - Male skittish but staying relatively close and eventually noticed that he preferred to stay in one area.

After much searching, we saw the female poking her head out of a hole we'd earlier dismissed. It was only 20 meters from the western edge of the highway. Later, she emerged and immediately began hawking for insects, returning to the nest after feeding for about 15 minutes.

Other birds we saw or heard in nesting area (150m x 100m): Common Raven, American Crow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Redwing Blackbird, Yellow Warbler, Pileated Woodpecker, Song Sparrow.

01 JULY 2011 - Clear & Calm - 07:00

– Male actively hawking for insects.

Male waited till I took a position in the highway ditch where I was partly hidden before he carried food to top of snag where the female promptly stuck her head out of the cavity and accepted the food before retreating into the nest hole carrying the food. She didn't eat any that I could observe.

Other birds we saw or heard in the nest area: Black-billed Magpie, Common Raven, House Wren, Yellow Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, Cedar Waxwing, Song Sparrow, unknown warbler.

09 JULY 2011 – Clear & Calm – 06:00

– Observed for 45 minutes. Male in the area but ranging farther than before. Not hawking as vigorously as previously. Female not seen.

10 JULY 2011 - Clear and Calm - 06:15

– Observed the area for one hour. Male ranging about but did not return to the nest site. Erratic hawking. Again, female not seen.

Birds we saw or heard in the nesting area: Gray Jay, Common Raven, Cedar

Waxwing, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Song Sparrow, Merlin.

13 JULY 2011 - Mostly clear – wind NW 10 km, 24°C, 14:30
–Male observed 200 meters from nest site half-way up on a branch of a dead spruce tree. Observed for one hour. female not seen.

Other birds we saw or heard in nesting area: one Song Sparrow, one Merlin.

15 JULY 2011 – Clear, calm – 16°C
– 07:00 – Unable to find male EABL
– The only birds seen or heard: 2 American Robins across the highway towards the golf course and 1 Merlin during one hour of observation.

Conclusions:

1. The probability is very high that this pair of EABL had established a viable nest even though direct observation of the nest was impossible without actually destroying it.
2. It is possible that the female became a victim of the Merlin which, ironically, had it's own nest only 30 meters from our cabin.

3. Eastern bluebirds will nest in north central Saskatchewan if suitable habitat is found. However, the presence of the EABL this far north could also be attributed to the very wet 2010 summer and the water-logged 2011 Spring. With the massive flooding of EABL habitat in Manitoba and south-eastern Saskatchewan, many of those birds may have expanded their search for suitable habitat and ended up outside of their usual breeding habitat. The report of a sharp increase of EABL in the Broadview area in a personal communiqué would tend to support this. (Don Weidl - personal e-mail.)

In another communication from Judy Nielsen at the Minewukaw sub-division at Candle Lake, an Eastern Bluebird had come to their feeder in late May 2011 but stayed only for a short time.

We waited to see if the Eastern Bluebird male would again return to PANP with a mate. However, despite intense searching in the 2011 nest area and other likely habitats in the southern part of the Park, no bluebirds were discovered in 2012.



*Eastern Bluebird in Prince Albert National Park
- Moe Mareschal*