

MALE EASTERN BLUEBIRD ASSISTS FEMALE MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD IN RAISING YOUNG

by **Lorne Scott**, Indian Head

The Eastern Bluebird (*Siala sialis*) is now considered by many people to be fairly rare in Saskatchewan. Even more uncommon than records of the bird itself are nesting records of the species in Saskatchewan.

A recent review of breeding records of the Eastern Bluebirds in Saskatchewan by Margaret Belcher (1966) seems to establish that the occurrence of this species in the province has been erratic, rather than following any definite pattern of increase or decrease, or of extension of range. Miss Belcher's review of the status of the Eastern Bluebird in Saskatchewan was prompted by the first nesting of the species in Regina in 50 years, and in the same year, 1966, three other nestings in the province were reported to the *Blue Jay*. One of these was at Okla, 40 miles northwest of Yorkton, in a nest box set out by David Ashdown (1966); the other two pairs were nesting one mile apart in nest boxes set out by myself south of Indian Head, and each of these pairs raised four young (Scott, 1966).

I know of no other reports of Eastern Bluebirds nesting in Saskatchewan until 1969. In that year, Arthur Neuls of Grenfell had a pair raise five young in one of his bird houses, where Fred Lahrman and I had the opportunity to observe them. I also had two pairs of Eastern Bluebirds occupy my houses in 1969. The first nest was discovered at Lemberg, but unfortunately vandals destroyed their nest and young and the adults were not seen in the area again. The second nest was located south of Indian Head, and this pair raised four young.

Now, in 1971, Dr. John Lane of Brandon reports his first record of an Eastern Bluebird nesting in Saskatchewan in the bluebird nest line that he has established, this nest being located two miles west of Whitewood on the CNR. One should comment in

this connection that Dr. Lane's extensive line of bird houses and our continuation of this nest line have undoubtedly increased the contacts between the two species of bluebirds.

On June 30 of this year (1971) I stopped at a bird house (#866 of my nest line) about one mile north of Lipton. There had been six Mountain Bluebird eggs in the house on June 8, and I knew that if all went well the young would be ready to band. Two eggs had not hatched, but I proceeded to band the four young which I found in the nest. As I did so, I saw the female Mountain Bluebird and later heard an unusual call from the second adult bird which was flying above me. I was surprised to note that the second one was a male Eastern Bluebird. It defended the nest aggressively, swooping within a couple of feet of my head several times. The female Mountain Bluebird was wary and kept out of sight most of the time while I was at the nest. The young birds in the nest were about 13 days old and well-feathered, and their plumage appeared



Photo by Gary Seib

Female Mountain Bluebird

to be that of normal Mountain Bluebirds.

I waited in the truck for 20 minutes in the hope that the adult birds would enter the nest box and that I could catch and band them. Although the female Mountain Bluebird did not come to the house while I was waiting, the male Eastern Bluebird entered the house and fed the young birds once, but he moved too quickly for me to catch him.

I returned to the bluebird house at midnight with Gary Seib to set up a blind for photography, and we caught the female Mountain Bluebird in the nest and banded her. This gave us the opportunity to examine her plumage carefully, and we found it to be the typical plumage of the Mountain Bluebird.

The following day Gary Seib spent six hours in the blind and photographed the birds. He observed that the male Eastern Bluebird defended the territory from Goldfinches and Tree Swallows. The male also brought food to the young about twice as often as the female.

On May 18 this nest box had contained five bluebird eggs, assumed to be those of the Mountain Bluebird since a female of this species was present. On June 8, I noted that a second nest had been built on top of the first nest and clutch of eggs. The second nest contained six eggs. This time a male Mountain Bluebird was observed at the nest as well as the female. In my experience with bluebirds, the finding of a second or even a third Mountain Bluebird nest built over the first nest and eggs is not uncommon. I believe that this happens when one or both of the adults have lost their lives or are forced to abandon the nest owing to some unusual circumstance. Then the remaining adult or another pair builds a new nest on top of the first nest.

In this case it would appear that the female Mountain Bluebird lost her mate after she had begun nesting and that the male Eastern Bluebird arrived in the area without a mate. The female

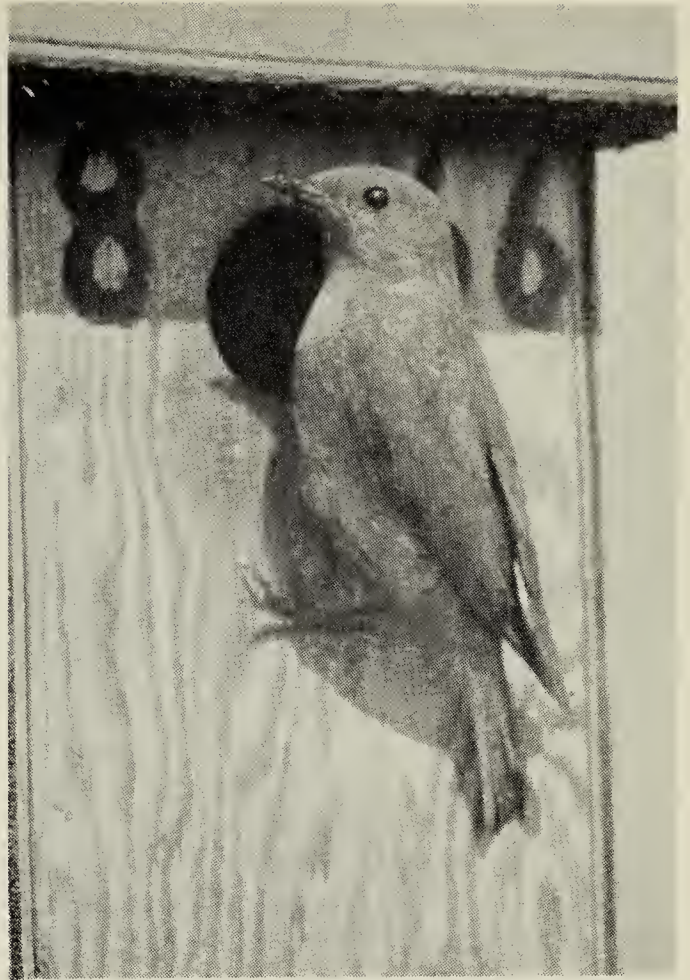


Photo by Gary Seib

Male Eastern Bluebird

Mountain and the male Eastern Bluebird accepted each other and the male Eastern Bluebird assisted in raising the four young.

When Gary Seib checked the nest again on July 10, the young had left the nest and no bluebirds were seen in the immediate area.

Dr. John Lane (1968, 1969) has given an interesting account of a hybrid Eastern Mountain Bluebird male mating with a female Mountain Bluebird and hatching young successfully, but evidently the association between the Eastern male and the Mountain female in the present case occurred after eggs were laid.

LITERATURE CITED

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