
NOTES AND LETTERS

EASTERN BLUEBIRDS FOUND DEAD IN NEST BOXES AFTER SPRING BLIZZARD

May 11 and 12, 2004, brought a severe and prolonged blizzard to southern Manitoba. Whipped by strong winds, 41 cm of wet, heavy snow fell from early morning of the 11th until after 6 p.m. on the 12th. Temperatures hovered around zero. Power failed in many areas. Highways were closed. Emerging gardens were buried. Trees sagged under the accumulating weight of snow, and many snapped, even some stout Bur Oaks. On the third day, the sun appeared, but the temperatures remained cold and so there was no quick melt.

At our home on the south-facing bank of the Assiniboine River Valley near Treherne, Manitoba, we operate bird feeders throughout the winter. These feeders attract a variety of spring migrants. The storm brought birds that we have never observed at our feeders before, including a Northern Cardinal (the first we had ever seen!), Brown Thrashers, towhees and Bobolinks, as well as goldfinches, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and several species of sparrow. We found it necessary to go out every hour or so to remove snow from the feeders.

In the garden on the sheltered side of our home, we noticed a strange dark clump on one of the shrubs, which turned out to be eight Tree Swallows, huddled together in a sad, bedraggled mass. Obviously, we could not feed them, though we called two experienced ornithologists for their ideas on what could be fed to birds whose diet consists of flying insects. At dusk on the 12th, all eight of these birds were observed climbing into a nest box in the garden.

The morning of the 13th, after the storm ended, I opened the box fearing to find it filled with dead swallows, but found it empty. My interest now aroused, I opened a second nest box in our yard. This box was half filled with snow. I left the box open to dry and then began

a tour of all our nest boxes, a difficult task through knee deep, wet snow.

We have 40 bluebird nest boxes in the two square mile area around our home. We share the nest boxes with our neighbour Hartley Woodward, a committed lover of bluebirds who constructed most of the boxes. I called Hartley on the morning of May 13, asking him to check his boxes in case some of them were snow filled. What we found shocked us, for there was not one live bird or nestling in any of the boxes.

One box had four dead male bluebirds inside, and several contained three dead. One nesting pair of bluebirds died with their eggs. One box had a dead Tree Swallow lying on top of four frozen bluebird eggs. The total number of dead birds was one Tree Swallow, two bluebird nestlings, eleven male bluebirds and one female bluebird. We do not know what became of all the other bluebird females. We also found twenty-eight frozen bluebird eggs. Four boxes were snow filled. The remaining boxes were empty. Since that time, until this writing on May 30, 2004 none of us has seen a bluebird. Tree Swallow numbers are significantly reduced, though a few are present. We found no tree swallow eggs or young, and we do not know what became of the eight bedraggled birds we had seen in the garden.

One ornithologist that we consulted suggested that the dead male bluebirds found clustered in boxes would have been on territory, where they hung on until it was too late, succumbing to hunger from the prolonged absence of insects. As this storm covered all of southern Manitoba and southeast Saskatchewan, we think that the impact on the bluebird population will have been severe.

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