

## CONFIRMED BREEDING RECORD OF EASTERN BLUEBIRDS NEAR BEAVERHILL LAKE, ALBERTA

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The Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) has been monitoring a series of nest boxes within and outside of the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area in central Alberta since the early 1990s. Mountain bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) commonly nest along the roads around Beaverhill Lake, and are fairly common in all Natural regions in Alberta except in boreal forest.<sup>1</sup> Elson Olorenshaw established bluebird nest boxes in 1995 and monitored them until his passing in 2002. Fourteen boxes are present along range roads near Highway 626 and Francis Point in close proximity to Beaverhill Lake. The habitat is characterised by open pasture land with stunted patches of trembling aspen and pockets of willow.

In the summer of 2010, the BBO staff was surprised to find the nest of an uncommon species in one of the boxes. An eastern bluebird (*S. sialis*) was discovered on 29 June 2010 in a nest box, located at UTM 12U 395993 5912940 (6.5 km east of Tofield, Alberta). The following is a timeline of the monitoring of the nest box during the 2010 breeding season.

**13 May:** First visit to the nest box (Fig. 1). A large, grass, cup-shaped nest lacking feathers had been started in the box; nest was characteristic of a mountain bluebird, but no birds were observed.

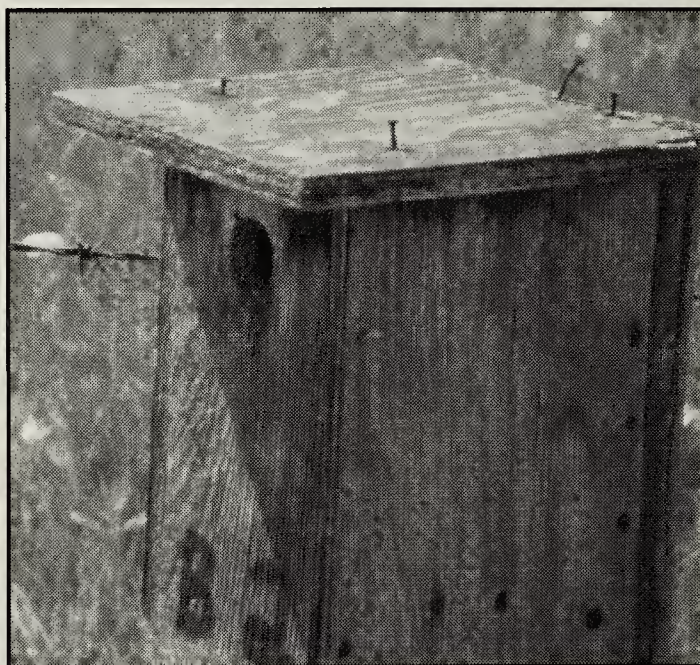


Figure 1. Nest box used by eastern bluebirds near Beaverhill Lake, AB.

**10 June:** Second visit to the nest. Two cold, blue eggs were present. On this date, four nests of mountain bluebird young were banded in nest boxes nearby.

**16 June:** Four cold eggs present in the nest (no adults seen around nest box).

**29 June:** Four chicks were found in the nest, but were not old enough to be banded (Fig. 2). A clear plastic door flap was attached to the inside of the box in an attempt to capture adults as they came in to feed the young (no adults had been seen in or near the box during the previous visits). Trap was left in the



Figure 2. Nestling eastern bluebird, about 10 days old.

box for approximately 30 minutes; staff were surprised to find that it was not a mountain bluebird, but a female eastern bluebird (Fig. 3, see inside front cover, top left). She was banded (#1541-15701) and identified as a second-year individual.<sup>2</sup> The male responded to her alarm calls during the banding and came in to investigate, allowing us to identify him as a male eastern bluebird.

*5 July:* The four chicks were banded (#1451-90902 to 05). A trap door was placed in the box again, to try and capture the male; he was observed near the box with a beak full of food, but he seemed to detect the trap door and was unwilling to enter the box. The trap was removed, and staff hid near the box in hopes of manually trapping the male in the box when he entered to feed the young. After an hour of attempting to capture the male, the staff left the box as he continued to refuse to enter.

*9 July:* The four chicks were examined again after more of their pin feathers had emerged; band numbers 1451-90902, 03, and 05 were identified as females, and 04 a male (Fig. 4, see inside front cover, top right), based on the intensity and extent of blue coloration in the wing coverts, primaries, and rectrices;<sup>2</sup> both adults were

observed near the box carrying food, but neither was captured.

Although widespread in eastern North America, the range of the eastern bluebird is limited in southern Alberta and southeastern Saskatchewan (occasionally there are records north to Saskatoon and Greenwater Lake districts).<sup>3</sup> The eastern bluebird first appeared in Manitoba in the latter 1800s, in Saskatchewan by the 1920s, and in southeastern Alberta during the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> This species is considered rare in Alberta.<sup>1</sup>

The Alberta Bird Record Committee evaluates and classifies records of rare birds within Alberta. A summary of 21 eastern bluebird records was obtained,<sup>5-7</sup> although the records for this species may not be as complete as those of more extreme rarities like the western bluebird (J. Hudon pers. comm.). Of the records provided, ten described breeding evidence (a pair seen together, a nest, young, or fledglings). The closest record to the nest we found was that of an individual eastern bluebird observed near Lindbrook (approximately 10 km west of Tofield) from 22 April to 7 June 1999. There was no mention of this individual breeding. Only one breeding record was north of Beaverhill Lake, just south of Fort McMurray at Anzac in 2006.

The nest discovered in 2010 near the Beaverhill Natural Area is the largest clutch size (4 eggs) reported for a pair of eastern bluebirds nesting within the province of Alberta. Eastern bluebirds lay three to eight eggs, and clutch sizes tend to be larger in the central part of their range.<sup>4</sup>

### Acknowledgements

We thank the Beaverhill Bird Observatory board of directors for their support. We thank Alberta Conservation Association, Nature Canada (Charles

Labatiuk Fund), for funding the nest box work as part of our operations. We also thank Jocelyn Hudon for providing information from the rare birds committee on Alberta records of eastern bluebirds. We thank an anonymous reviewer for editorial comments.

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*Young turkey vulture, one of a pair of youngsters being banded during August 2011. They were in the attic of an old farmhouse by the river in Saskatoon.* Nick Saunders