



## Bluebird Committee Report 2012

**2012 was a good year for Bluebirds.** We collected data from 256 Bluebird houses. In total, there were 23 successful pairs of Bluebirds, which produced 132 fledglings. That's an increase from 2011 numbers. That year, we collected data from 256 birdhouses. We counted 21 successful pairs of Bluebirds, with only 101 fledglings.

Our success in 2012 is due in part to the weather. In most winters, there are periods of severe weather – deep freezes, ice storms, and blizzards. Prolonged periods of severe weather take their toll on local Bluebird populations. However, the 2011-2012 winter was unusually mild. There were no periods of severe weather. In fact, there was very little snow. There were many reports of wintering Bluebirds. These birds made it through the winter. Obviously, there were very few winter casualties because the Bluebirds were in good numbers in late March.

On warm sunny days in January and February, these wintering birds were observed catching Crab Spiders and insects! Having protein in their diets helped keep the birds healthy which contributed to their winter survival. Our volunteers took advantage of the mild weather. All of the clubs' birdhouses were washed and inspected by late January. In February and early March, we were putting up new birdhouses. Pollards, Balkwills, Fords, Michinskis, and the Mother-wood Trail all received new birdhouses.

It was fortunate that we had all the trails ready to go early. Spring came early for everyone, including Bluebirds and Tree Swallows. There were many reports of male Bluebirds singing at Bluebird houses through February and early March. On Saturday, March 10, the start of a Bluebird nest was discovered by Alan Batke. This is the earliest we've ever recorded. Just a few days later, on March 13, Gil Breton reported the first Tree Swallow. Again, this is the earliest we've ever recorded. By March 15, Tree Swallows were reported by almost every Bluebirder in Southern Essex County. It mid-March, we saw some "daily highs" which were 15 degrees C. or better.

### Firsts

- 1<sup>st</sup> Bluebird singing: Friday, February 3, Bob Tanner and Don B. were working on the Pollard Trail. They observed a male Bluebird singing on top of a tall tree.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Red-Winged Blackbird: Reported by Alex Michinski, also on Friday, February 3. This solitary male was on Alex's farm near Harrow.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Wood Ducks: Cy Poisson saw a pair of "Woodies" at his backyard pond on Sunday, March 4, just south of Essex.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Bluebird nest: On Saturday, March 10, Alan Batke and Don B. were inspecting the bird houses at the Balkwill Farm. They discovered the start of a Bluebird nest – on a warm and sunny day.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Tree Swallow: This "early bird" was reported by Gil Breton. He saw the Tree Swallow in his back yard near Woodslee on Tuesday, March 13. This is a New Record for our Committee. By March 15, Tree Swallows were plentiful in Southern Essex County.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Purple Martin: Linda Lyman reported the first Martin at her home in Kingsville on Friday, March 30.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Hummingbird: A male Hummer was reported by Alan Batke on Monday, April 16, at his home just outside of Kingsville.
- 1<sup>st</sup> House Wren: Reported on Monday, April 16. This bird was discovered by Alex Michinski, at his farm near Harrow.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Bluebird hatching: While Monitoring at Caney Creek, Bob Tanner found a nest of recently hatched Bluebirds on April 30.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Tree Swallow: An single egg was discovered during the "Bluebird Tour" on Saturday, May 5, by Bob T. on the Balkwill Farm.

### Lasts

Both September and October were warm and beautiful. There were many reports of Tree Swallows. In early October, many called to report Tree Swallows over the sewage lagoons, just south of McGregor. There were also reports of Tree Swallows over the sewage lagoons along Highway #3 near Essex. A single Tree Swallow was reported on Thursday, October 25. This bird was observed by Don B. in Essex. This bird was flying west over Brien Avenue East, and calling frequently.

## In the City

In the Spring of 2012, there were reports of Bluebirds along the Ganatchio Trail in East Windsor. Some reported a single male Bluebird. Others reported a pair. Most sightings were at (or close to) the city's tree nursery. Denise Hartley confirmed these sightings; she spotted a single male Bluebird one morning.

## News from the Trails

### Chickadees

In March, Alan Batke and Don B. discovered a pair of Chickadees on the Balkwill north trail. These birds were staying close to birdhouse #1. In time, they built a nest. Unfortunately, in early April, they were usurped by a male House Wren. The Chickadees moved out of the area. This was the third Chickadees' nesting attempt we've encountered. We have never recorded a successful Chickadee nesting.

Years ago, one affiliate Bluebirder told us about a pair of Chickadees nesting close to his backyard. The pair build a nest and laid a clutch of eggs. Unfortunately, a pair of English Sparrows usurped them.

A few years ago, a pair of Chickadees were discovered at Altenhof's. They were found in March and were staying close to Bluebird house #4. In early April, they had started a nest. Unfortunately, a pair of Tree Swallows were also staying close to Bluebird next #4. The Swallows dive-bombed the Chickadees mercilessly. By mid-April, the Chickadees had moved out of the area.

### Lucky Turkey Family

Last Spring, while Monitoring at the Transfer Station, Alan Batke saw a wild female Turkey. Later, he discovered a Turkey nest. This nest contained eleven eggs. The grass in the area had been recently mowed. Fortunately, the nest was not harmed. The tractor driver had, inadvertently, straddled the nest. Also the gang-mower had been set high enough (8") so that the nest of eggs was not harmed.

On his next visit to the area, Alan checked out the nest. He found that all eleven eggs had hatched. Alan was unable to locate the family. That's to be expected as hen Turkeys always lead their poults away from the nest soon after hatching. (Baby Turkeys are called poults which we learned last year.)

### Widowed Bluebird Finds a Helper

Last March, a local Bluebirder was happy to find a pair of Bluebirds at one of his birdhouses. He was worried for their safety, because a male English Sparrow was occasionally visiting the area. On one visit in April, the Bluebirder made a sad discovery. The male English Sparrow was chirping on the roof of the birdhouse. A female English Sparrow was close by. The Bluebirds could not be found.

He opened the Bluebird house and made another sad discovery. The male Bluebird was dead, laying on the nest. He had been pecked to death by one of the Sparrows. The Monitor removed the deceased Bluebird. He left the Bluebird nest in place. He was able to capture and re-locate the Sparrows over the next few days.

About a week after finding the dead male, the Monitor returned to this birdhouse. He spotted the female; she was alive and well! Inside the Bluebird house, he found the completed Bluebird nest which now held four Bluebird eggs. The Monitor wondered "Are these eggs fertile?" "If they're fertile, can the widow hatch and raise this brood on her own?"

The Bluebirder wrote the "expected hatch date" in his notes. The Monitor returned to this house a few days after the "expected hatch date." He studied the house from a distance, using binoculars. He was surprised to see a new male Bluebird sitting on the roof! Later, this new male caught an insect and passed it on to the female Bluebird in the house.

Over the next few visits, he continued to see the female and the new male in the area. On one visit, he opened the house and found four nestling Bluebirds – obviously all four eggs were fertile. In time the four youngsters fledged. Immediately, a pair of Tree Swallows moved in and raised a brood of young. The blended family moved out of the area.

It is possible that this female Bluebird did find a new mate. Another possibility is that the new male was an adult son of the widowed female. Bluebirders who study banded birds have observed this in the past. An un-mated adult Bluebird of either gender will sometimes assist its widowed mother or father with raising a brood of young.

## Delayed Incubation in Bluebirds

Bluebirds and other small birds lay one egg each day. When the last egg of the clutch is laid, incubation usually begins. With Eastern Bluebirds there are three different paths which the mother Bluebird can take.

**“Normal” start of incubation:** The mother begins incubation on the day that the last egg in the clutch is laid. After fourteen days of incubation, all the eggs hatch on the same day. This is what we commonly see on our Bluebird trails.

**“Next-to-Last” start of incubation:** In this case, the female begins her incubation the day before the last egg is laid. In other words, she starts incubation when the next-to-last or second-last is laid. This results in most of the eggs hatching fourteen days after incubation has started. However, that last egg hatches one day after his nest-mates. Being kept warm is not a concern for the last egg. The mother Bluebird broods her newly hatched nestlings as much as she did when they were eggs. We have seen several cases of “next-to-last” starts of incubation. In these cases,



the late hatching youngster is successful. Apparently, being only one day younger than the nest-mates is not significant enough to cause any problems.



**“Delayed” incubation:** The mother Bluebird lays her clutch, then waits to start incubation. Sometimes the wait is a few days; in other cases the wait can be a week or more. Each year we see a few cases of delayed incubation in Bluebirds. Some Bluebirders write the “estimated hatch date” in their notes. One Bluebirder was scratching his head when he first encountered a delayed incubation. He hadn’t heard of this. “I’d written in my notes that the hatch-date was May 6,” he told me. By May 10, the eggs had not hatched. “I feared the eggs were all duds. I checked the house again on May 15. Four of the five eggs had hatched and the nestlings were a few days old.” In some

cases of delayed incubation, I have seen the male Bluebird stay close to the house. He will drive away house-hunting Tree Swallows.

This year, Don B. had his biggest case of delayed incubation. One female Bluebird at the Harrow Research Station delayed incubation by at least sixteen days. On April 3, a complete Bluebird nest was found with three eggs – in birdhouse #3. The adults were absent. Over the next few visits, it appeared that the pair of Bluebirds was gone for good. A pair of Tree Swallows stayed close to the house. Don parked his truck ¼ mile away and watched the house, using binoculars. Still, no Bluebirds could be found. Don had a nice surprise on Tuesday, April 24. As he approached the bird house, the female Bluebird exited the house.



On Saturday, May 5, the house was inspected. All three eggs had hatched! The nestlings were two days old, making their hatch date May 3. By counting back fourteen days before the hatch date, the start of incubation is revealed: in this case, the math brings us to April 19.....sixteen days from when the full clutch was discovered. The pause may have been longer. The clutch was found on April 3. Had the clutch already been there for one day? Two days? Three days? Some Bluebirders found egg laying began this year on the last days of March. These three young Bluebirds fledged successfully on May 20. The pair had a summer nest of four young. Again, the female Bluebird delayed the incubation. This time, the delay was ten days. Perhaps she will always be a procrastinator.

### Dried Mealworms

*Bluebirders and Martiners may want to check this out! Recently, while shopping at Harrow Home Hardware, I came across “Stokes Select Dried Mealworms.” The 100 gram (3.5oz) container has a re-sealable lid. The instructions say they can be re-hydrated by soaking in warm water for thirty minutes. It’s likely available at other Home Hardware stores (\$5.99 + HST).*

### Red Bud Trees for Sale!

*Thanks to everyone who purchased a Red Bud tree! 20% of the sales were donated to the Bluebird Committee. More Red Bud trees will be available for sale through Don’s Landscaping in October of 2013. Planting is also available. Again, 20% of the sales will be donated to the Bluebird Committee. Call Don Bissonnette at 519-738-3279 for more information.*

## The Brunch Meeting

Our 2012 Brunch Meeting was held in the “fireplace room” at Rose’s Kitchen in Essex. Sixteen people gathered to share their Bluebirding experiences and discoveries. Thank you to Rose and Staff – food and service were excellent.

This year, we were joined by JoAnn Grondin and Cathy LePain. These two ladies are cousins and Baillee Bird-a-Thon participants. They spoke to us about their experiences. Both JoAnne and Cathy contribute financially to our Committee by their involvement in this Baillee Bird-a-Thon. Thanks again to JoAnne and Cathy for sharing with us and for keeping the Committee running! During the brunch, the “Top Bluebird Producer” for 2012 was revealed. Congratulations to the team of Claire and Marg Calder! They Monitor seventeen Bluebird houses on two properties. They produced a total of 50! fledgling Bluebirds in 2012. Our “Top Tree Swallow Producer” for 2012 was Gil Breton. Gil Monitors a total of 49 Bluebird houses. Most of these houses are on the Woodland Hills Golf Course. In 2012, Gil counted 154 fledgling Tree Swallows. Gil was also the Top Tree Swallow Producer for 2011! Congratulations!

## Upcoming Events

### Saturday, February 23

The Walpole Island Purple Martin Project is hosting the “Birds and Nature, Right in Your Own Back Yard Conference”. It will run from noon to 5:00 p.m. A free, light lunch will be available. Guest speakers, vendors, and exhibitors. (Members from our Ontario Purple Martin Association will have a display set up.) Free admission. Donations accepted. Info: [www.ontariopurplemartins.ca](http://www.ontariopurplemartins.ca)

### Saturday, March 16

The Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society Annual Meeting will be held at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton. A special meeting is planned to celebrate the Society’s 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Info at: [www.oebs.ca](http://www.oebs.ca)

### Friday, April 5 and Saturday, April 6

The Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania is joining with the Purple Martin Conservation Association to host the Joint Bluebird-Purple Martin Conference. Guest speakers, silent auction, door prizes. Info: [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org) or [www.thebsp.org](http://www.thebsp.org)

This year, there will be two Bluebird tours. Both will meet at the Greenway parking lot on Arner Town Line at 9:00 a.m. This parking lot is less than a kilometer north of County Road 18. Don Bissonnette, along with Bluebird Committee volunteers, will lead the tours. We will drive to nearby Bluebird trails. PLEASE WEAR BOOTS!! NO PETS PLEASE. Tours usually last 2.5 hours

1<sup>st</sup> tour: Saturday, April 27, 2013 9:00 a.m.                      2<sup>nd</sup> tour: Saturday, May 3, 2013 9:00 a.m.

### October 3, 4, and 5, 2013

This year’s North American Bluebird Society’s Annual Conference is being hosted by the South Carolina Bluebird Society, in Aiken, South Carolina. Tours, guest speakers.

Info: [www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org)

Info: [www.southcarolinaBluebirds.org](http://www.southcarolinaBluebirds.org)

## THANK YOU

Thanks to the clean-up crew. These folks took advantage of the mild January 2012 weather. By late January, they had all the club’s birdhouses washed and inspected. In early February, we finished washing most of the affiliate birdhouses which we monitor. In mid-February, we set up new bird houses.

Thanks to EVERYONE! Joan Affleck, Graham Brown, Alan Batke, Bob Tanner, Monica Poisson and everyone else! Everyone involved with our winter clean-ups say they enjoy these outings. We often spot wildlife, discover animal tracks, and hear a lot of tall tales.

THANK YOU for T.D. Canada Trust. Their “Friends of the Environment Foundation” gave us a grant in late March 2012 for printing and mailing of the 2011 Bluebird Report.

THANK YOU to all those computer-savvy people who emailed out the 2011 Bluebird Report – Caroline Biribauer, Graham Brown, John Balga, and many more. Thanks a bunch!

THANK YOU to Bettie and Gerry Fraser. Over the years they have frequently contributed to our Bluebird Committee. This year the Bettie typed and photocopied this 2012 newsletter. Bettie and their daughter, Suzie, created this 2012 newsletter.

Welcome aboard to Allan Batke who is the latest addition to our Bluebird Committee. Alan has been monitoring his own birdhouses for some years now. In early 2012, Alan joined our Committee. He monitored the Balkwill trails and the Transfer Station trail near Ruthven. Alan and his wife, Karen, write the column “Ask the Master Gardeners” in the Windsor Star.

*SPRING IS RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER!!! Are your birdhouses ready?  
Best wishes for the 2013 Nesting Season*

Sincerely, Don Bissonnette

