

The Essex County Field Naturalists' Club's
BLUEBIRD COMMITTEE REPORT FOR 2017

The Bluebirds had a fair year, in 2017. We counted 22 successful pairs of Bluebirds which produced 101 fledglings. This is a decrease from 2016, when we counted 25 pairs with 132 fledglings.

The main reason for the decrease, is the weather. In late April and early May, there were several days of cool, wet weather. On some days, the rain was constant, from sun-rise to sun-set. This resulted in the death of many nestling Bluebirds.

Another reason for the decline is fewer birdhouses to collect statistics from. Every year, a Monitor or two quits. This results in trails being taken down or abandoned. Also, some trails are taken down because they are too over-grown. In 2014, we gathered statistics from 256 birdhouses. In 2017, we collected statistics from only 197 houses.

On a positive note, the Tree Swallows had a good year. We had a total of 147 successful pairs of Tree Swallows. They produced 677 fledglings, which averages out to 4.6 fledglings per nest.

In February & early March, I built 19 Birdhouses. In late February and March, the 'Winter Work Crew' was busy setting up these Houses. Thanks to Bluebird Committee Members, Joan Affleck, Charlie Farough and Bob Tanner for all of your dedication and hard work.

Good Bye to Bob Tanner, who is retiring from the Bluebird Committee. Bob was a dedicated volunteer with the Bluebird Committee for 12 years. He looked after 5 trails and a few houses in his own back-yard. Bob was often part of the Winter Work Crew. Bob, you will be missed!

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'FIRSTS' For 2017.

1st Kildeer...A single Kildeer was observed near Harrow, Ont. on February 16th, by Don Bissonnette

1st Tree Swallow... was reported by Gil Breton, on March 24th, near Woodslee, Ont. Later that day, Alex and Shirley Michinski, John Balga, and Don Bissonnette also reported Tree Swallows.

The 'Start of a Bluebird Nest' was recorded on March 18. Bernard Beneteau reported this partially-built nest at the Kentucky Coffee Tree Trail, near McGregor, Ont.

1st Bluebird Egg...On April 7th in the late afternoon, Don Bissonnette found a Bluebird nest with 6 eggs. This Nest was on the Grosso Trail, North of Harrow, Ont. Considering that one egg is laid every morning, the first egg was laid on April 2nd, or earlier! This Nest resulted in the 1st Nest of Hatchling Bluebirds. Don Bissonnette recorded these tiny hatchlings on April 21st. All 6 Eggs hatched.

1st Tree Swallow Hatchlings... A nest of 6 hatchling Tree Swallows was discovered on June 7. Don Bissonnette discovered these tiny hatchlings at the Tuckette Farm near Harrow, Ont.

CONGRATULATIONS to Fern Bellavance, who is now an 'Official Bluebirder'. Fern has been living near Harrow, Ontario for a few years now. He has had success with Tree Swallows at his place, for a few years. In 2017, a pair of Bluebirds settled into one of his houses. The pair was successful and produced 3 fledglings. Congratulations, Fern, we hope you have Bluebirds at your place every year.

Many Tree Swallows were reported through the Fall. It was unusually warm through September and early October. Many Tree Swallows were not in a hurry to leave. There were numerous Hurricanes in the South. Were the Tree Swallows aware of them, and slowed their migration to avoid them?

The last report of Tree Swallows in 2017 was on October 24th. Don Bissonnette observed several Tree Swallows going over the Arner Townline. Don saw these birds close to the 4th Concession. They were heading South, and mostly keeping over the large ditch, on the East side of the road.

The 'Blue Roof' Research Project....In late February and early March, our 'Winter Work Crew' set up an additional 5 test sites. So we started the 2017 Nesting Season with a total of 7 test sites. The results were interesting and echoed the results we recorded in 2015 and 2016. I wrote a separate article about it. You should receive it soon, if you haven't already. In a nutshell, we wanted to see if Bluebirds preferred to build their nests, in regular brown birdhouses, or in blue roof birdhouses. We did a 'side-by-side' test, and found that the Bluebirds prefer the Blue roof houses. (Read more about it, in the article, 'Researching 'Blue Roof' Birdhouses.) Thank you to every-one who helped to fund this research. We realize that having only 7 test sites is not very scientific. We plan to set up some more test sites, in late February and March.

CONGRATULATIONS to Joan Affleck, the BLUEBIRDER OF THE YEAR! Joan monitors 4 trails. In early May, Joan lost many nestling Bluebirds because of the bad weather. Despite these losses, she counted 5 successful pairs of Bluebirds with 32 fledglings! She is also part of the Winter Work Crew. Thanks for all of your dedication, Joan!

THANK YOU to every-one involved with the 'Bluebird Committee'! Please keep in mind, that Charitable Tax Receipts are issued for all Financial Contributions! Best Wishes for the 2018



Nesting Season!

Sincerely, Don Bissonnette

ESSEX COUNTY FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB							
BLUEBIRD COMMITTEE PRODUCTION CHART FOR 2017							
Trail	Monitor(s)	# of houses	# Successful	#Fledgling	#Successful	# Fledging	# Pairs of
Club Trails			Pairs of Ea. Bbs.	Ea. Bbs	Pairs Tr. Sws	Tr. Sws	H. Wrens
Altenhof	Don Bissonnette	4	2	8	2	10	2
Balkwill	Alan Batke	7	1	4	6	33	0
Doyle	Bob Tanner	3	1	2	3	11	1
Grosso	Don Bissonnette	3	1	9	3	15	0
Harrow R. Stn	Don Bissonnette	4	1 *1		3	13	1
Lucchese	Joan Affleck	4	1	4	3	12	0
O'Neil	Joan Affleck	7	3	24	4	17	4
Parr	Bob Tanner	2	1	7	1	5	0
Vagi	Bob Tanner	2	1	5	2	9	0
Woodiwiss	Bob Tanner	3	0	0	2	10	2
	Total	39	12	64	29	135	10
	* This fledgling is from a natural cavity						
Affiliated Trails							
Albertville	Rob Cornies	4	0	0	4	19	0
Ambassador	Dennis Shady	10	0	0	4	21	0
Amhesrtburg	Dan Mustar	3	0	0	1	4	0
Balga	John Balga	10	0	0	9	36	0
Batke	Alan Batke	2	0	0	2	8	0
Bellavance	Fern Bellavance	5	1	3	4	18	0
Boose	Rob Boose	2	1	5	2	9	0
Breton	Gil Breton	12	0	0	10	46	0
Coulter S Rd	Joan Affleck	6	0	0	6	19	0
Dunn Rd	A. Michinski	29	0	0	25	131	0
Ford	W. & N. Ford	10	1	3	8	26	0
Fryer	Bob Tanner	4	2	9	3	12	1
Hamel	Paul Hamel	2	0	0	1	5	0
Hamill	Al Hamill	6	0	0	4	17	0
Knapp	Marianne Knapp	5	0	0	2	10	0
Kent C Tree	B. Beneteau	7	2	10	5	30	0
Naturescape	Dan Bissonnette	2	0	0	1	6	0
O'Hagen	Tim O'Hagen	2	0	0	1	6	0
Poisson	C. & M. Poisson	6	1	4	2	7	0
Santarrosa	Joan Affleck	2	1	4	1	2	0
Smith	Alex Smith	2	0	0	1	4	0
Tanner	Bob Tanner	4	0	0	4	19	0
Transfer Stn	Don Bissonnette	4	1	2	3	14	0
Tuckette F	Don Bissonnette	4	0	0	4	18	1
Waldron	Gerry Waldron	15	0	0	12	60	1
	Total	158	10	40	119	547	3
	Grand Totals	197	22	104	148	682	13

Researching The 'Blue Roof' Birdhouses. By Don Bissonnette

In 2014, some of the members of the Essex County Field Naturalists' Club's 'Bluebird Committee' were discussing the idea of painting a birdhouse's roof blue. On some Facebook Bluebird Groups, the idea of blue roofs was being discussed. There were claims, that Eastern Bluebirds preferred these houses for nesting. Also, there were reports that the House Sparrows were less likely to nest in these houses.

Some members of the Committee, (myself included) wanted to test these blue roof houses. We wanted to find out if the Bluebirds preferred them. Also, we wanted to see if the Houses Sparrows would nest in them, or not. I decided to test these houses. I tested them, in what some people call a 'Side-by-side' test. I placed two birdhouses in good Bluebird habitat, about 30' apart. The two houses were identical, except one was entirely soft brown and the other was soft brown with a blue roof.

With a side-by-side test, it's important that both houses have identical measurements. Let's suppose, that the blue roof house had a larger interior. And let's suppose, a pair of Bluebirds nested in the blue roof house. Then, there is a new question...Did the Bluebirds choose that house, because of the blue roof, or because of the larger interior? So, I did my best to make each pair of birdhouses identical, give or take a millimeter. Each pair of birdhouses had the same measurements. Also, I used the same thicknesses of wood. All entrances were the usual $1\frac{3}{8}$ " x $1\frac{5}{8}$ ".

In early April of 2015, I set up the first 'test site' at a small farm, near McGregor, Ontario. This was good Bluebird habitat, and Bluebirds had nested on this farm, in recent years. The results at this site were interesting. In early April, the Monitor caught several House Sparrows at the brown house, but none at the blue roof house. He reported, that while he was catching a few House Sparrows each day, the Bluebirds were building their nest, just thirty feet away, in the blue roof house. The pair of Bluebirds produced a healthy brood, with Tree Swallows nesting in the brown house. As soon as the young Bluebirds fledged, a second pair of Tree Swallows moved into the blue roof house.

In 2016, I set up a second test site. This was at a small farm, near New California, Ontario. Bluebirds had never nested on this farm, but had nested on the farm, across the road, for many consecutive years. The results were similar to the McGregor test site...The monitor caught several House Sparrow at the brown house, while a pair of Bluebirds peacefully built their nest, thirty feet away, in the blue roof house. Eventually, Tree Swallows settled into the brown house.

This Monitor obviously had beginner's luck, because his first Bluebird nest had six Nestlings, and all six fledged successfully. Unfortunately, soon after the Bluebirds fledged, some House Sparrows tried to occupy the blue roof house. This family of Bluebirds moved to a house, several hundred feet away. Here, the adult Bluebirds built their Summer Nest. The Monitor

was able to catch the House Sparrows at the blue roof house. A late-nesting pair of Tree Swallows quickly moved into this house.

Also, in 2016, the McGregor test site also had similar results, as the year before...Bluebirds in the blue roof house. A few House Sparrows, then Tree Swallows in the brown house. But, was all of the results just a coincidence? Having only 2 test sites, was not very scientific. I needed to expand the research.

Thanks to the generosity of some supporters, (individuals and organizations) I was able to expand my research. In the early months of 2017, I built ten more birdhouses. Or, to be more precise, 5 more pairs of identical twin houses. This time, there were some pairs of Peterson houses. Also, blue stripes were added to the front of the blue roof houses. (See the photo.)

The five new test sites were set up, in late February & March of 2017. Due to obstacles, like rocky soil, trees and large mud puddles, some pairs had to be placed forty feet apart, or more. Four of these test sites were set up in Essex Township, near Harrow, Ontario. The fifth site was near McGregor Ontario, about two kilometers from the first McGregor test site.

We started 2017 with seven test sites. Six of these sites attracted Bluebirds. All six pairs chose to build their Spring nest, in the blue roof houses! Perhaps our earlier findings were not just a coincidence, after all!

At five of the test sites, (#1, #2, #4, #5, & #6), the Bluebirds produced healthy Spring broods, which all fledged in the second half of May. Like the previous years, Tree Swallows nested in all of the brown houses. In most cases, late-nesting Tree Swallows moved into the blue roof houses, soon after the young Bluebirds fledged.

Test site #5, was different from the rest. The pair of Bluebirds built their nest in the blue roof house, but this nest was not successful. The young hatched very early, and died in late April or early May. At that time, our area had several days of cold wet weather, with some rains lasting all day. (There were several other reports of Bluebird nestlings that died at that time.) The Monitor cleaned out the Bluebird nest. Soon after, House Sparrows tried to move into the blue roof house, which kept the Monitor busy. The blue roof house remained empty for the rest of the nesting season. As usual, the brown roof house hosted a healthy brood of Tree Swallows.

Test site # 7, was also different from the others. In late May, the young Bluebirds fledged, & the Monitor removed the old nest. Soon after, a pair of House Wrens built a large dummy nest in this blue roof house. If these Bluebirds wanted a Summer Nest, the blue roof house was no longer available. Fortunately in late June, the young Tree Swallows in the brown house fledged. The Monitor removed their old nest, and the Bluebirds quickly moved in. They had a successful Summer brood. This was the only Summer Bluebird Nest, at any of our test-sites in 2017. Also, it was the first Bluebird nest, in a brown house, at any of our test sites, since we started this experiment.

As for House Sparrows, there is nothing concrete to report for 2017. One Monitor reported that he forgot to record the number of House Sparrows captured at the houses... but he assures me he caught a lot more House Sparrows at the brown house. Most Monitors recorded similar numbers of House Sparrows at both houses. A total of five House Sparrows were caught at the brown houses. The same total, five House Sparrows, were caught at the blue roof houses.

A few Monitors, made the same observations, at their test sites.....

1...The House Sparrows seemed scared of the blue roofs. When visiting these houses, they rarely sat on the roof. Instead, they hung on the entrance. When they did sit on the roof, it was only a brief moment. They usually clung to the edge of the roof.They rarely ever hopped across the blue surface.

2...The House Sparrows did not usurp any birds nesting in the blue roof houses.

3...The House Sparrows only attempted to nest in the blue roof houses, when they were vacant, and the brown houses were occupied by Tree Swallows.

I realize the above observations are simply observations. Again, it may have been a coincidence that most Monitors, including myself, had the same findings. It would be more scientific, if we collected data from twenty-seven sites, not just seven. I hope to build a few more houses, & set up some more test sites in early 2018.

Are you interested in experimenting with blue roof birdhouses? Set up your own side-by-side test site, and make your own observations. It would be nice, if you could share your results with our group. When it comes to Wild-life research, many discoveries are made by 'Citizen Scientists'. Each discovery may seem small, but many small discoveries may add up, and, together, significantly help our Bluebirds.

RESULTS OF PAIRED BIRDHOUSE EXPERIMENT, 2017											
BROWN ROOF VERSUS BLUE ROOF											
Trail	Monitor	Brown Roof					Blue Roof				
		# Pairs		# Fledged		# Ho. Sps.	# Pairs		# Fledged		# Ho. Sps.
		Ea. Bbs.	Bluebirds	Tr. Sws.	Tr. Sws.	Encountered	Ea. Bbs.	Bluebirds	Tr. Sws.	Tr. Sws.	Encountered
Boose	Robt. Boose	0	0	1	5	0	1	5	1	4	0
Doyle	Bob Tanner	0	0	1	3	0	1	2	1	4	0
Kentucky CT	B. Beneteau	0	0	1	6	0	0	0	1	7	0
Lucchese	Joan Affleck	0	0	1	1	3	1	4	0	0	1
Naturescape	Dan Bissonnette	0	0	1	6	0	1	0	0	0	2
O'Neil	Joan Affleck	0	0	1	3	1	1	4	1	4	2
Parr	Bob Tanner	1	3	1	5	1	1	4	0	0	1
Totals		1	3	7	29	5	6	19	4	19	6

These 'Tuckette Farm' nestling Tree Swallows were about 14 days old in the photo. This Nest was originally a Bluebird nest, but House Sparrows invaded the nest half-way through the incubation, on May 11th. The House Sparrows, threw out all 4 eggs, and chased the adult Bluebirds away. The House Sparrows were captured, but the Bluebirds did not return. The Bluebirds moved to another house, several hundred feet away.

A pair of Tree Swallows moved into this house. They added more nesting material to the Bluebird nest. The female Tree Swallow laid her first egg on May 23. In time, she had a clutch of 6 Eggs. All 6 Eggs hatched. All 6 young Tree Swallows fledged on Canada Day (July 1st).

The Bluebirds had success with their second nest, producing 3 fledglings. This was the last time I opened this house. To prevent young Tree Swallow from fledging prematurely, I stop opening the house when the young Tree Swallows are 15 days old, or older. They usually fledge at 19 days old.



A nest of tiny Bluebird Hatchlings, on the Altenhof Trail, near New California, Ont. This photo was taken in the Spring of 2017. All 5 call simultaneously, "Feed Me!". We place handfuls of White Pine Straw close to each house. As you can see, the Adult Bluebirds use it, to build their nests. Photo by Don Bissonnette



These Bluebird hatchlings were photographed on July 27, at the Grosso trail. This is actually a third brood. This pair of Bluebirds started the Nesting season, with their first brood of 6, hatching in late April. Unfortunately, all 6 Nestlings died in early May, due to bad weather. Their 2nd nest was successful, with 5 young birds fledging in mid-June. This 3rd brood was also successful. All 4 fledged around August 12th or 13th. Photo by Don Bissonnette



Some Houses about to receive more coats of paint & stain.

