

Essex County
FIELD NATURALISTS'
CLUB



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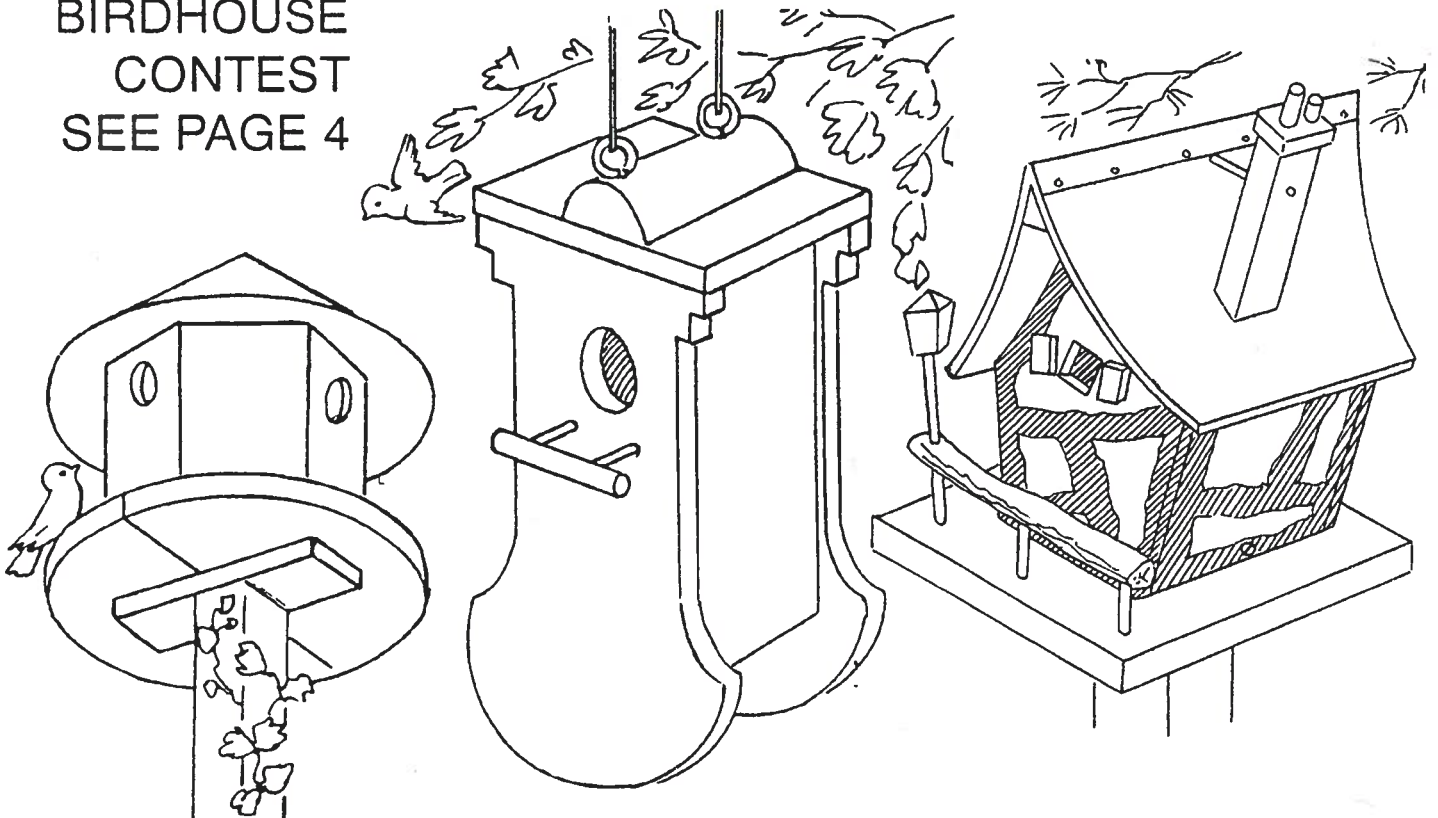


Volume 8, Number 4, December, 1991

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BIRDHOUSE
CONTEST
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ESSEX COUNTY FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

1992 MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL FORM

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

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INTERESTS _____

Please enter / renew my membership in the E.C.F.N.C. in the following category:

Individual membership - \$ 15.00 per year _____

Family membership - \$ 20.00 per year _____

Sustaining membership - \$ 25.00 per year _____

Life membership - \$150.00 per person _____

Junior Egret - \$ 5.00 per year _____

Please make your cheque payable to the ESSEX COUNTY FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB and mail to: Essex County Field Naturalists' Club, P.O. Box 3421, Tecumseh, Ontario N8N 3C4.



The Essex County Field Naturalists' Club is an incorporated, non-profit organization open to anyone with an interest in nature and conservation. Club objectives are to promote the appreciation and conservation of the diverse natural heritage of Essex County and surrounding region; to provide the opportunity for people to become acquainted with and to better understand the natural environment; to promote the identification, preservation, maintenance and restoration of natural areas of high quality for living things; to co-operate with and support other organizations with similar objectives.

Indoor meetings with guest speakers and slide shows are held monthly from September until June, on the second Wednesday of each month at the Marlborough Community Centre at 7:30 p.m.

Field trips and other activities are held throughout the year. Our club newsletters, The Egret and Junior Egret, are published quarterly and mailed to all members.



MAMMAL ATLASSING -- BACKYARD STYLE

By Betty Learmouth

After attending an introductory mammal atlassing workshop in early June at the Objibway Nature Centre, my thoughts were that I really should get started on the project, but it was not until a warm September evening that I took the first step toward participation. While reading beside a window which has a view of my backyard wildlife garden, I noticed my neighbor's cat sitting behind the wooden crate which serves as a convenient stepping platform to a low bird bath. The cat seemed particularly interested in something behind that box, as she would extend and withdraw her paw. Her facial expression indicated there was something intriguing behind and under that crate!

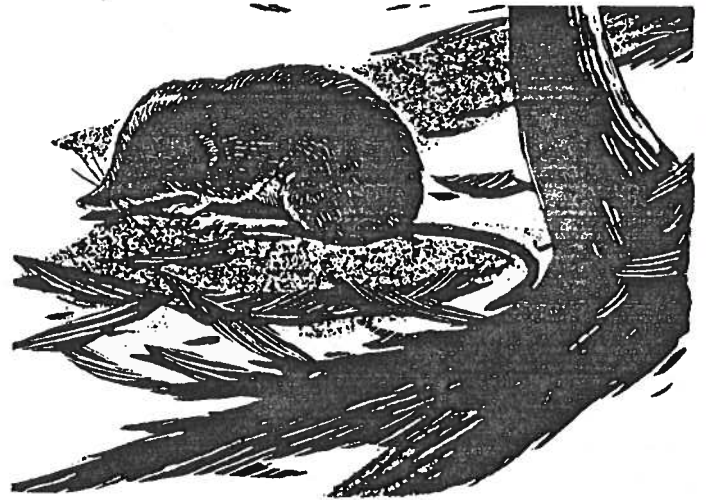
When I heard a high pitched squeal from the backyard, it instantly reminded me of the time earlier in the spring when this same cat had been found worrying a tiny, unidentified mammal. I rushed outside to the garden where I found a five-inch long mammal in a threatening position. Standing on its hind legs with its teeth well exposed, this small mammal was an alarming figure. My initial reaction, which proved to be correct, was not to touch this small, belligerent creature, but to remove the cat to her home.

Upon depositing the cat with her long suffering owner, I returned with a copy of the Peterson guide -- *A Field Guide to the Mammals* -- which illustrated on Plate 1 just the mammal that was under the packing box. This feisty little mammal was a Northern Short-Tailed Shrew, distinctive because of its slate grey fur colour, its blunt nose, tiny eyes, lack of visible ears and its short tail on a relatively large shrew body.

As I wished to learn more about this mammal "lifer" I consulted several other guides to mammals. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals provided

information that confirmed my well considered decision not to handle this small mammal. The saliva of the Northern Short-Tailed Shrew is venomous and will cause several days of severe pain to any human who is unlucky enough to be bitten by this fierce little shrew. For the intended prey of this shrew, a bite from this mammal means paralysis and death to the insects and mice that this shrew favors as food. The *Mammals of Canada* by Banfield provided considerable information about the life history of this shrew which is the commonest of the shrews. It is noted for its tunnel construction in soft soil within its territory. Perhaps its tunnels are located under the small brush pile and shrubs at the rear of the garden.

Essex County has a number of small mammals that are not frequently seen. As a member of the mammal atlas volunteers, I look forward with keen anticipation to finding and identifying a number of mammal "lififers."



SHELL FUND PROVIDES \$480 GRANT FOR BIRDHOUSES

The Shell Environmental Fund has awarded the Essex County Field Naturalists' Club \$480.60 to build additional Bluebird houses.

Bluebird Committee spokesperson Don Bissonnette said he was delighted by the fund's generosity. The money will be used equally, he said, to purchase poles for the bird houses and to buy kits from which club members will construct the houses.

At \$7 a pole and approximately \$7 a kit, he estimated that the grant will allow the creation of at least 34 complete units. The club is presently negotiating with a number of local carpentry companies for the best deal on the kits.

Bissonnette said he hopes the club members will be able to start constructing the houses immediately after Christmas in order to have them in place along trails in late March. This is important, he stressed, because Bluebirds are one of our earliest songbirds to nest.

According to information supplied by Shell, the \$1 million Environmental Fund has received more than 1,300 applications from community groups and individuals across Canada.

Since June of 1990, fund officials have approved a total of \$1,148,129 for 579 environmental projects from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island. Projects have included purchase of materials for recycling, habitat cleanup and restoration, waste reduction and other "action-oriented" environmental projects.

Individuals, schools, service clubs and community environmental groups have received grants ranging from \$50 to \$5,000 per project.

The projects are selected by panels consisting of two environmentalists, a senior government official and a Shell employee. The groups meet from four to six times a year to review applications under the general guidelines of "worthwhile environmental projects." The Shell announcement noted that projects having a high volunteer or community commitment and demonstrating an innovative approach to solving environmental problems are highly rated in the selection process.

The fund is administered from Calgary, Alta., and additional information may be obtained by calling Shell's toll-free number, 1800-661-1600.

RATTLER'S FUTURE CLOUDY AT BEST

Image problem, loss of habitat has Massasauga in trouble

By Martin Mittelstaedt
Globe and Mail Environment Reporter

TOBERMORY, Ont. -- Deep in the heart of Massasauga rattlesnake country, Bruce Peninsula National Park warden Doug Sweiger admits that saving the slithering reptile from extirpation won't be easy.

The snakes have venom-packing bites, crawl about on their bellies and devour small rodents in a single gulp -- just the kind of thigs that give the shivers to herpetophobiacs.

Consequently, many humans have taken to clubbing the ugly critters to death whenever the opportunity arises. The wanton killings, along with habitat destruction, have been so efficient that the once-common reptile was placed on the country's endangered species list this year.

"People for centuries have been taught that snakes weren't a good thing and particularly venomous snakes were a thing to be gotten rid of," Mr. Sweiger laments.

The Eastern Massasauga, one of only three venomous snakes in Canada, used to be abundant throughout the U.S. Midwest, and in Ontario along the Lake Erie shore and most of the Lake Huron shore area. (The other venomous snakes are the Northern Pacific rattlesnake in British Columbia and the Prairie rattlesnake in Saskatchewan and Alberta.)

Now, the only remaining healthy Eastern Massasauga population is around Georgian Bay, in places such as the Bruce Peninsula National Park, a scenic area of woods and ask-colored limestone bluffs 10 kilometres south of Tobermory.

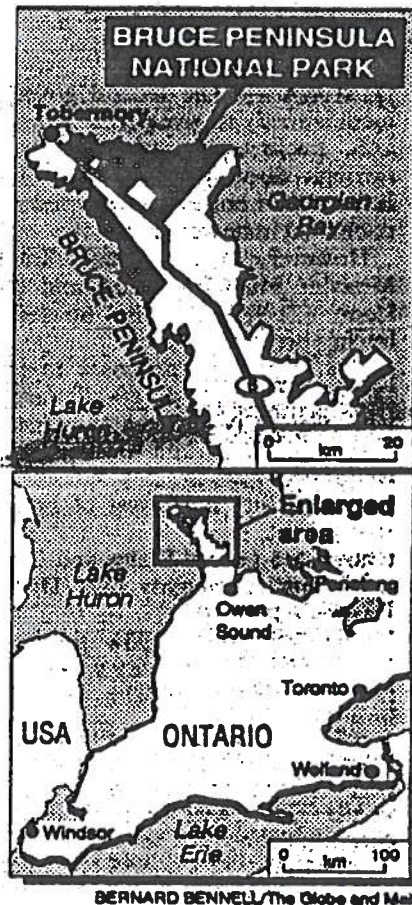
Over the past three years, Canadian naturalists and biologists have undertaken a major effort to preserve the remaining population of *Sistrurus catenatus*.

The record for dangerous-snake preservation isn't good. The only other rattlesnake in Ontario -- the timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) -- has not been seen since the 1940s.

Outside the Georgian Bay area, Massasaugas have been seen in the past six years only in the Wainfleet Marsh near Welland and in the Ojibway Prairie nature reserve near Windsor, according to the Ontario Herpetofaunal Summary.

Both these small populations are under pressure. Indeed, at the Wainfleet site, searches by naturalists from the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo and the Canadian Parks Service this summer were unable to locate any of the animals.

Snake experts believe the two isolated populations in the southwest of the province are no longer viable, unless supplemented by introductions from elsewhere. That leaves only the



Georgian Bay area with a large population, probably numbering in the thousands, based on a recent marking experiment.

Naturalists branded the belly scales of 100 snakes with soldering irons, which leaves a mark that remains even after the skin is shed. To date, none of the scarred rattlers has been found dead on roads or otherwise seen again by naturalists in the national park, an indication of bountiful numbers.

Also at the Bruce Peninsula park, three years of radio tracking studies to detect movement of the snakes are just being completed, an effort to find habitats preferred by the snakes. The research, in which radio transmitters are implanted in the snakes, will be used to place camp-

grounds and trails in areas the reptiles do not frequent -- minimizing their contact with human visitors.

The snakes like to bask in marshes and coniferous forests, while avoiding open areas, such as roads, trails, water and mixed forests, according to the research.

The snakes are considered mild-tempered, and seldom strike at people unless provoked or stepped on.

Still, snakebites can be dangerous. At least two people have died from Massasauga bites this century in Ontario, the last, a nine-year-old girl in 1962 near Penetanguishene.

Another part of the effort to preserve the snakes is being undertaken by Robert Johnson, curator of amphibians and reptiles at the Metro Toronto Zoo. He's trying to convince cottagers that they can live in harmony with rattlesnakes, an important step if the reptile is to survive outside parks.

"The fear that people have of the snake is unfounded . . . They don't chase you or come after you." Mr. Johnson said.

Snakes are protected under Ontario fish and games laws and killing them is illegal, although few charges are ever laid. Mr. Johnson recommends that cottagers who find one on their property don a pair of rubber boots, grab a broom and sweep the snake into a metal garbage can with a tight-fitting lid. The snake can then be released in areas away from humans.

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BLUEBIRD HOUSE CONTEST

So, you think you can build a pretty good Bluebird house eh? Well, here's your chance to win a prize, and help wildlife -- cavity-nesting birds to be precise.

There is no entry fee for this contest. All entries become the property of the Bluebird Committee. These houses will be put up in Bluebird habitats, located by the Bluebird Committee. Our club presently has several Bluebird trails. Some are on private land, others are on conservation areas and municipal properties.

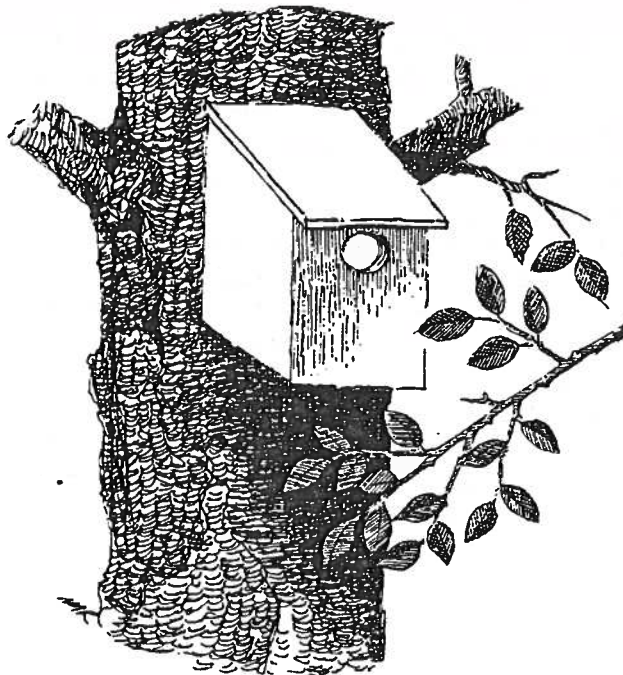
So bring your Bluebird box out to the February meeting.

1st Prize — Statue of fledgling Bluebird and Hummingbird Garden Kit

2nd Prize — Hummingbird Garden Kit

3rd Prize — Hummingbird Garden Kit

4th Prize — 2 potted miniature roses, one pink, one white, donated by Brentwood Garden Centre in Tecumseh.



HOW TO BUILD A BLUEBIRD HOUSE

By Don Bissonette

Building bird houses is a pleasurable and rewarding experience. It's a nice winter pastime and even an amateur carpenter can put one together in an hour. Your bird houses might become home to a family of cavity-nesting birds and give you an opportunity for nature study, plus natural insect control.

Here are a few good plans for Bluebird houses. Other native cavity-nesters will use Bluebird houses. These include Tree Swallows, Tufted Titmice, House Wrens as well as Flying Squirrels. You can develop your own plan, too.

Here are some points to keep in mind when building the houses.

1. Lumber

Use wood that is $\frac{1}{2}$ inch or thicker. The thicker the wood, the more insulation it provides against heat and cold. Cedar and Redwood are ideal. Both are strong, weather-resistant and long-lasting. However, they are both expensive. Most bird-house builders use pine or exterior grade plywood.

2. Nails and Screws

Use galvanized nails and screws. The size of the nails and screws depends on wood thickness. Spiral nails are best.

3. Stains and Paints.

Houses built of pine or any inexpensive wood will last a few more years if they're painted or stained. It's not necessary to paint the interior of the box. In fact, paint-type fumes will linger inside the box for months. These fumes will discourage the birds or possibly injure the health of any which take up residence.

Use natural colours such as light brown, gray or earth-tone red. These neutral colours will keep the interior of the house at a comfortable temperature. Do not use white or glossy paints. They attract the attention of predators such as raccoons. Do not use dark colours. They cause the bird-house interior to overheat.

Water-sealers are nice for bird houses. Two coats will turn white wood into soft brown or soft gray. Water sealers do not make the wood glossy.

Whether you paint, stain or use wood sealer, be very generous with the roof. The roof is constantly being bombarded by the elements and is very prone to cracking. Some bird-house builders put three coats on the roof.

4. The Entrance (See Illustrations 1, 2, 3, 4)

As you can see from the illustrations, the entrance doesn't need to be a perfectly round hole. Presently different entrances are being tested. Some birders feel the Bluebird prefers the elliptical entrance.

Whatever entrance you create, keep it high up in the box, at least six inches from the floor. Disaster can strike if the entrance is too close to the floor. Sometimes it allows the young to fall out, or a raccoon could reach in and pull out the babies. Starlings can stick their heads in the entrance and pull out the young with their long bills.

Bluebirds and other native cavity-nesters prefer an entrance hole $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches across. An entrance hole of 2 inches may attract the uncommon Great Crested Flycatcher. However, here in Southwestern Ontario, it will most likely attract Starlings.

The entrance should be protected by sufficient roof overhang. The entrance needs protection from rain and mid-day sun.

5. Depth of Box

Most of our native cavity-nesters prefer some depth to their houses. Shallow boxes present the same problems mentioned in item 4. As well, deeper boxes discourage the English Sparrow from nesting. Some Bluebird houses are now being built 10 inches deep. They involve a lot of wood. However our native cavity-nesters will use them and predation is very low.

6. Predator Guards

This is a block of wood 1 inch thick or more. This makes it

more difficult for raccoons and other predators to reach inside. It does create a longer climb into the box, however the native birds don't seem to mind. English Sparrows are also discouraged by predator guards.

7. Footing

Do not use perches. Our native cavity-nesters are indifferent to them. English Sparrows are attracted to bird houses with perches. Footing is important in the interior of the box. Grooves under the entrance help the fledglings to climb out of the box. Create grooves with a carving knife or wood chisel.

8. Floor space

Some plans call for 5" X 5" or 3 1/2" X 5 1/2" or 4" X 4". Bluebirds have used homes where the floor is 3 1/2" X 3 1/2". However, most birders agree bigger is better. Larger floor space creates less crowding for the growing young birds.

9. Opening

The box should be able to be opened for cleaning and inspection. Some boxes have removable floors which are easiest for

cleaning. However, the nest cannot be studied. Some boxes open from the roof. Do not use hook and eyes to hold the roof down. Raccoons are clever and can figure out how to open them. Houses with opening roofs are nice for nature study, but are difficult to clean.

Side-opening models and front-opening models are easy to clean and can also be opened to inspect the nest. Do not open the box if the young birds are 12 days old or more, since they could tumble out. Some boxes are both roof-opening and floor-opening. These are ideal, however they take a little more time to build.

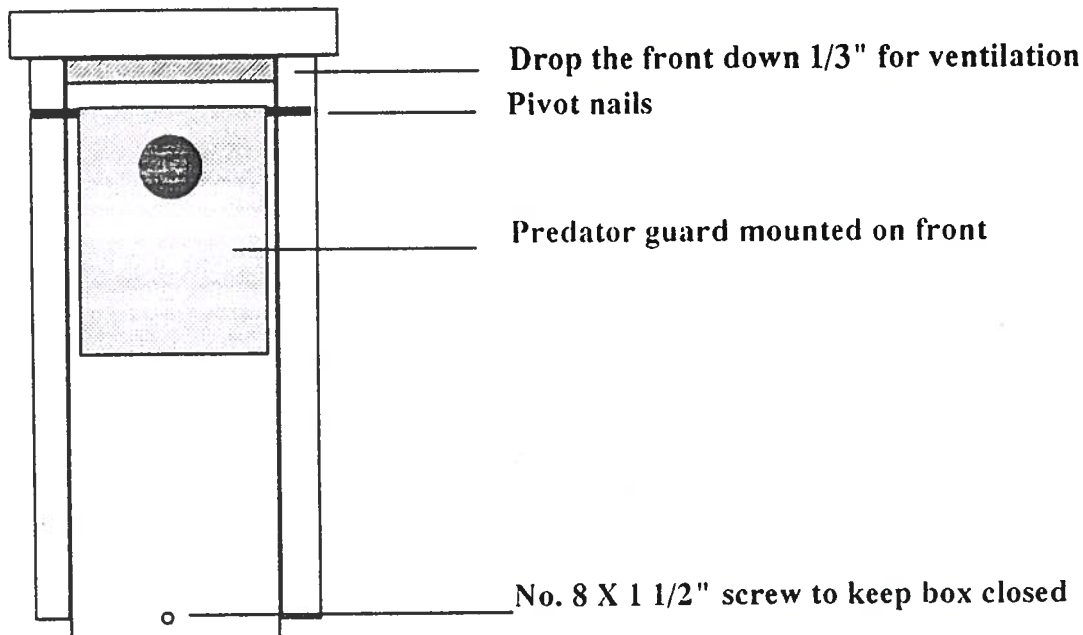
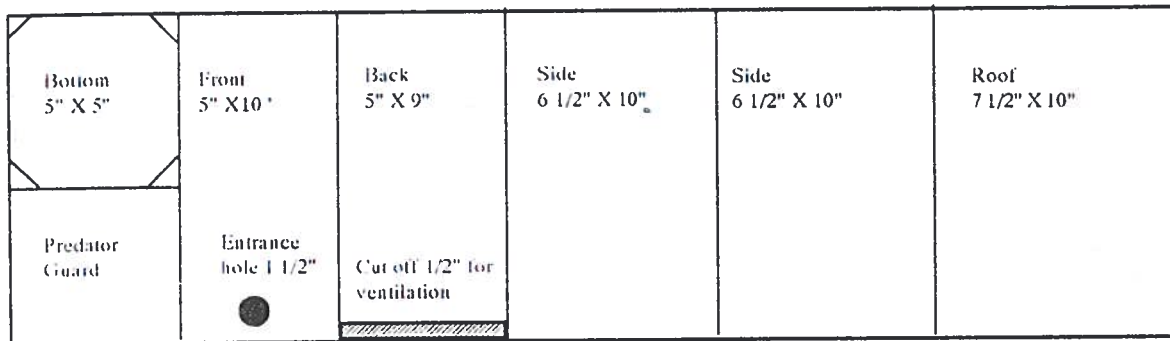
10. Ventilation

Air circulation is important. There should be ventilation on both sides of the box.

Set the roof so that it doesn't close tightly on the sides, or drill several small holes on the sides, just under the overhang. Cut the corners off the floor. This assists in ventilation and it allows for drainage should any water get in.

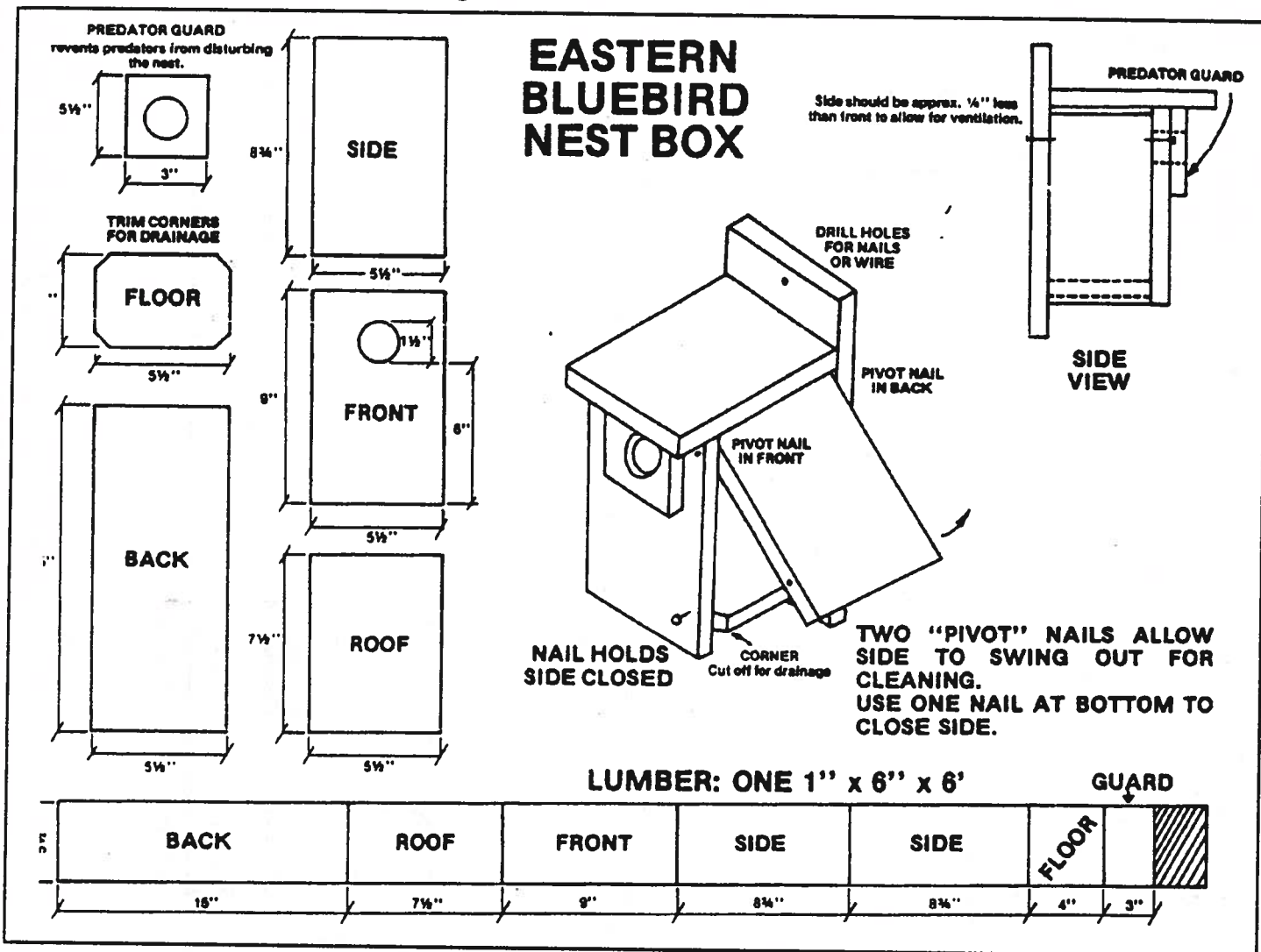
Plan I

This plan comes from Ohio. It calls for 3 feet (36") or 1" X 10" lumber.

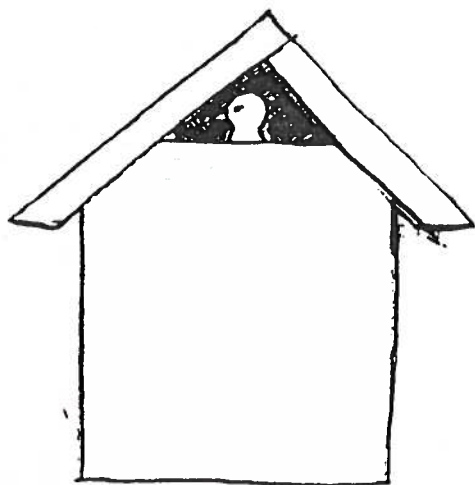


Plan 2

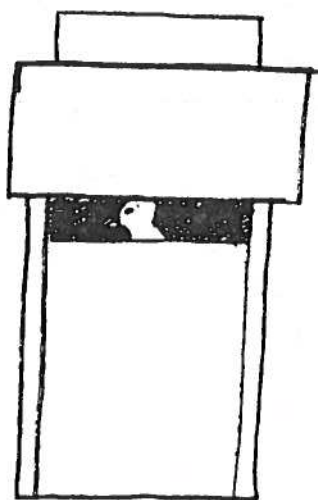
This plan originated with the Michigan United Conservation Clubs.



Entrance designs

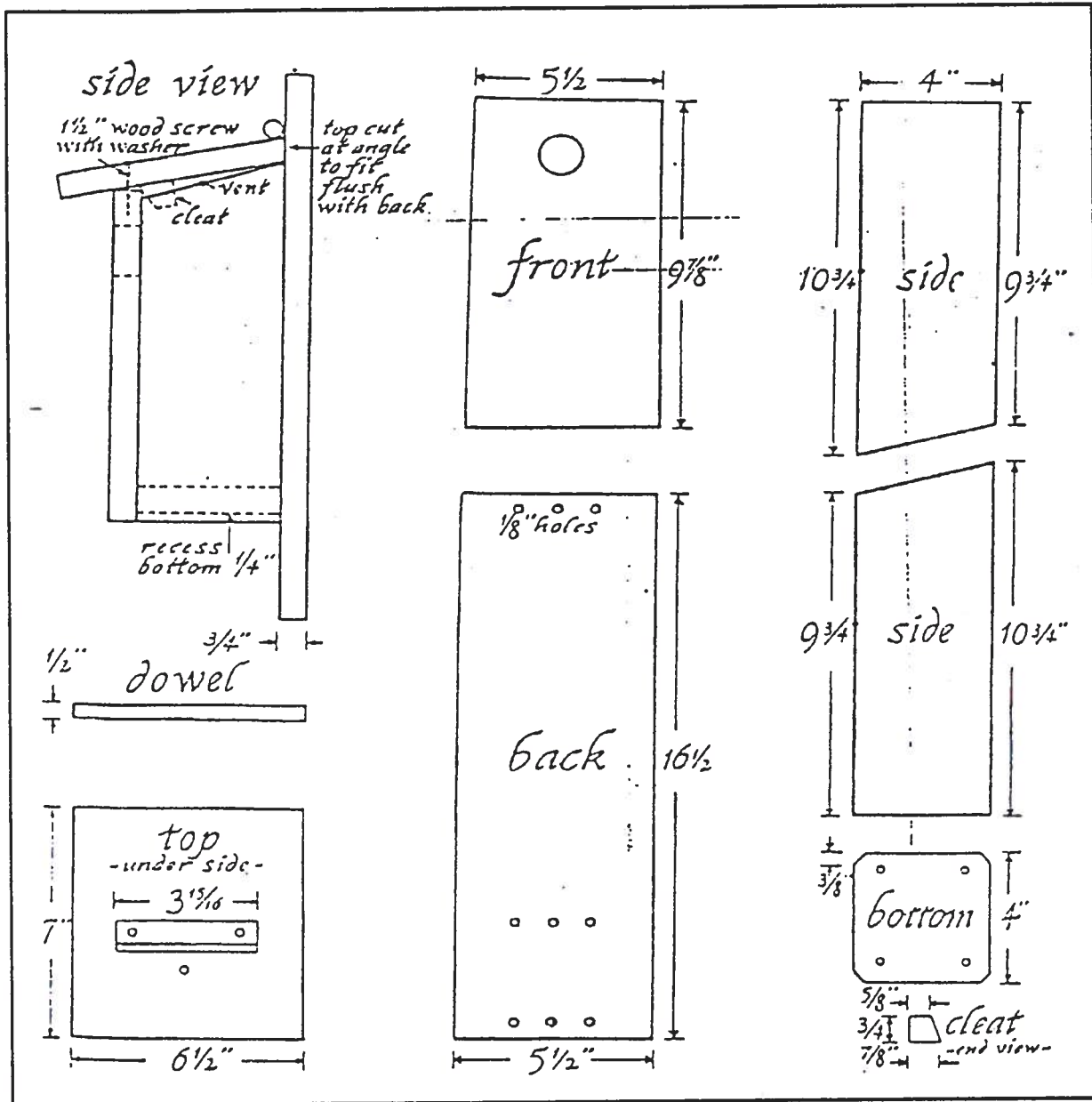


Under-the-roof triangular entrance

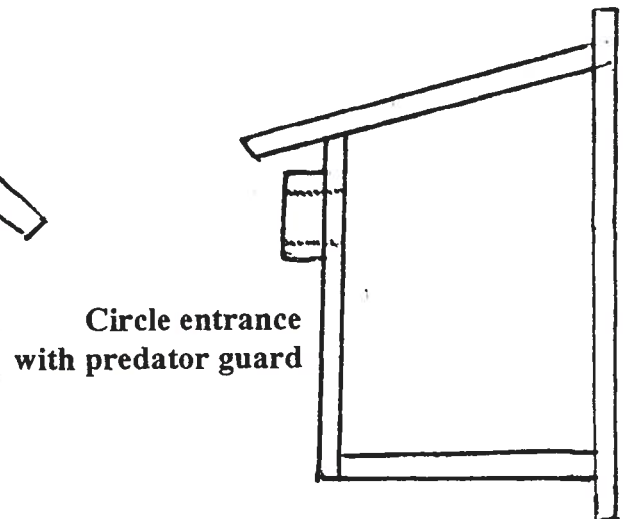
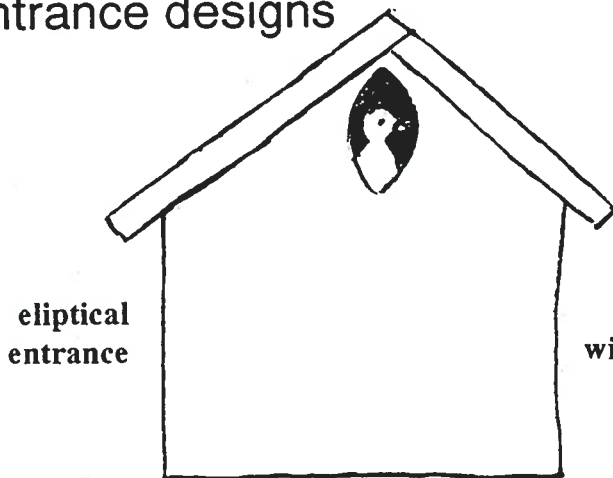


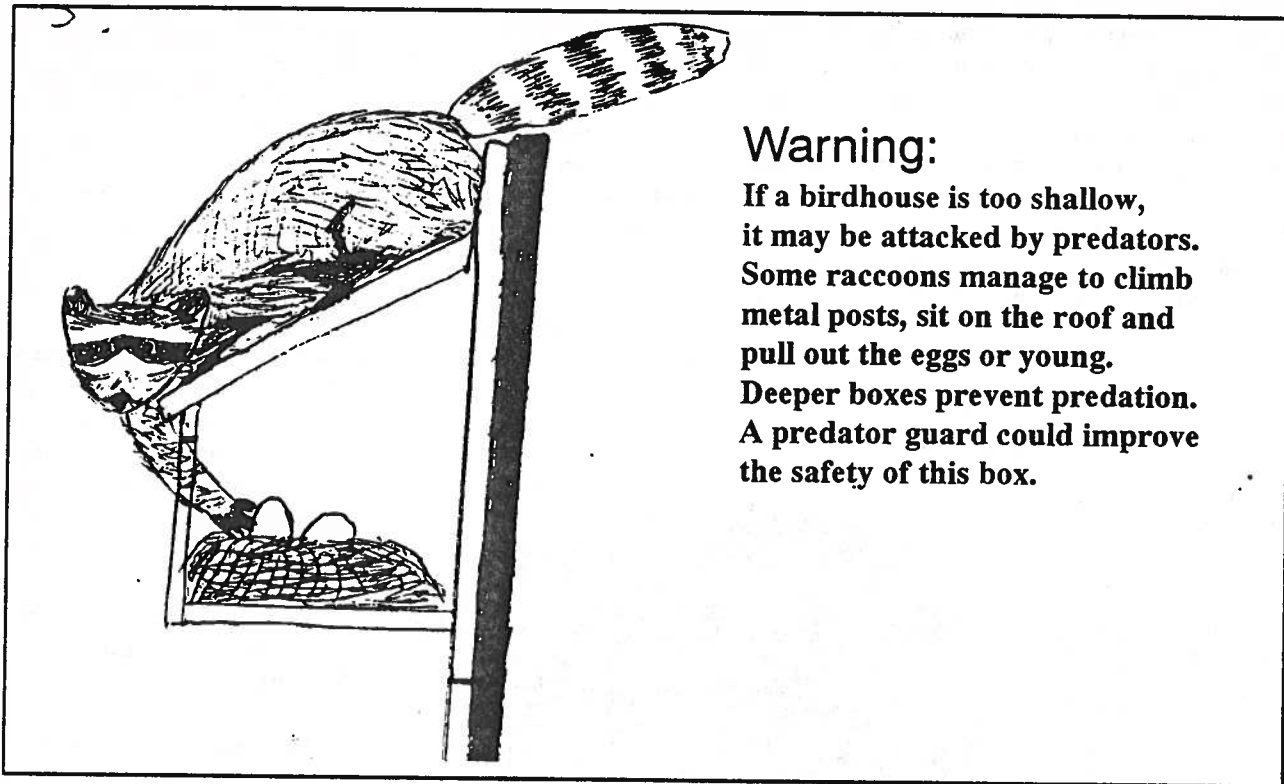
Under-the-roof linear entrance

Plan 3



More entrance designs





Warning:

If a birdhouse is too shallow, it may be attacked by predators. Some raccoons manage to climb metal posts, sit on the roof and pull out the eggs or young. Deeper boxes prevent predation. A predator guard could improve the safety of this box.

EASTERN BLUEBIRD OBSERVATIONS

By William H. Balkwill

The year of 1991 for me has been a very enjoyable time as it has meant working with a lot of great people -- ECFNC members, Eastern Bluebird Committee members, landowners and others.

This year the Eastern Bluebirds' behavior has been puzzling. In areas where they had previously nested, they arrived early, inspected nest boxes and in some cases even built nests, then left. One friend, who with his brother has had Bluebirds nest on their property for thirty years and usually have one or two occupied nest boxes, said that the birds returned and built several nests, then abandoned them. The same birds built in one of the club boxes, then abandoned it to nest on the original property. They only raised one chick.

Usually the male Bluebird will arrive in early to mid-March. He can be found in sheltered glades in the woods. On warm days he will search for nesting sites. His cheery call can be heard as he proclaims the area his own. From late March to early April, the female arrives. Together they busily fly back and forth, inspecting several boxes. Eventually they choose one nest box. Sometimes they build a nest, but not usually. Then they disappear for one or two weeks. When the couple return they build a nest. Sometimes the hen begins to lay a clutch of eggs, but the usual behavior is that they stay nearby driving intruders away from the nest box for another week or two. When the first clutch is about to fledge, the hen builds a nest in a new site. Within a week after the first brood fledges, the hen starts to lay the second clutch. At completion she starts to brood again, leaving the male

to look after the first brood. This year the birds acted differently in that the second nesting did not begin until two or three weeks after fledging the first brood.

Then there was the matter of the third nesting on the Pleasant Valley Trail. A friend who is a successful veteran Bluebird raiser challenged the report of the third nestings, claiming they were probably just second nestings. After thinking a moment, I concluded that he was probably right. Of the two nests at the west end of the trail, one was a second nest of a pair that had their first two nests destroyed on a neighboring property before successfully nesting on the Pleasant Valley Trail. The other came from across the road from a neighbor who had one rather late successful nesting. Then there was the one on the east end of the trail. Due to the fact that the eggs were laid in the same nest immediately after the second brood fledged and only one of the four eggs was fertile, it may have been a different pair.

There was also the case of a pair of Tree Swallows which hatched and raised a young Bluebird. The swallows raised four young to fledglings. One Sunday morning when checking on some of the nest boxes where swallows were bothering the nesting Bluebirds, I saw the Swallows chase a hen Bluebird from a box. Later when I opened the box, I found one Bluebird egg. You can imagine my surprise a week later when I opened the box to see a Tree Swallow on a single Bluebird egg!

I check the nest three times before the bird fledged. The last time I checked Gerry Waldron was with me. Two days later we made the July census and found that the Bluebird chick had fledged. The rest of the chicks raised in a nearby box by the parent Bluebirds were leaving their nest. Two had left and were

heard calling from nearby shrubs. the other two were still on the nest. It is very unlikely the Bluebird raised by the Swallows survived.

The importance of adequate monitoring became clear in two separate incidents. One involved a private Bluebird trail of about six nest boxes. As I listened to the owners, it became clear that they did not open the boxes to check on the progress of their birds. In fact, they had no idea when or how many young, if any, had fledged. I doubt very much that they fledged as many birds as they claimed.

The other case involved a landowner upon whose land we had placed a part of our own trail. They had a private box with Bluebirds nesting. On our first census, I observed the parent birds whose behavior was that of birds with young ready to leave the nest. At the nest census, the owner claimed Starlings had broken up the Bluebird nest and had taken over. In this case, I believe the Starlings actively took over the nest after the Bluebirds had fledged. A bi-weekly nest check would probably have proven this.

One morning, upon looking out of my bedroom window, I saw a Starling being chased by a pair of feisty Bluebirds that nested

at the corner of our house yard. When the Starling left, it was plain to see the neighborhood was too rough for him! For the first time in three years, Starlings did not break up the Tree Swallows' nest in a nearby box. After the Tree Swallows fledged, the Blue birds made their second nest in it, rearing five young.

Another time I noticed a Blue Jay trying to get into the nest box. The male Bluebirds tried to oust him from the area, by the way he was too nimble. Then hen left the nest and joined the fray. The Blue Jay was soon driven away.

A few weeks later we had a thunderstorm. Lightning struck two trees quite close to the nest box. The next morning I checked the box expecting to find roasted Bluebird chicks. I was overjoyed to find them unscathed. The parents were quite upset with me. That evening, after checking the condition of the sabayon fields, I returned by the centre lane, close to the nest box. The parent birds saw me coming and flew toward me, flying straight at my face. Startled, I lifted my hands toward the oncoming birds. They flew upward to about 10 feet over my head. Then they turned around and flew ahead of me and scolded me from various perches. This plucky pair fledged nine chicks in two nestings. A few more pairs like these would go a long way toward assuring the success of our project.

Over the last ten years, whenever I have heard of a person who

has a nest of Bluebirds, I have phoned them to find out the kind of success they are having. This year, a salesman who happened into our yard, stated that his mother-in-law had a nest in her backyard. She lives approximately a mile down the road from me. I gave her a call. She told me that she had a nest and that I could drop in to see it. Her son, a man in his fifties who had built the box, was delighted at the success of the nesting and was inviting all his friends to see the Bluebirds.

One day when I was passing her place, I stopped in. She showed me the box located on the north side of an elm tree, a spot I would have concluded to be too shaded. In the box were two young Bluebirds.

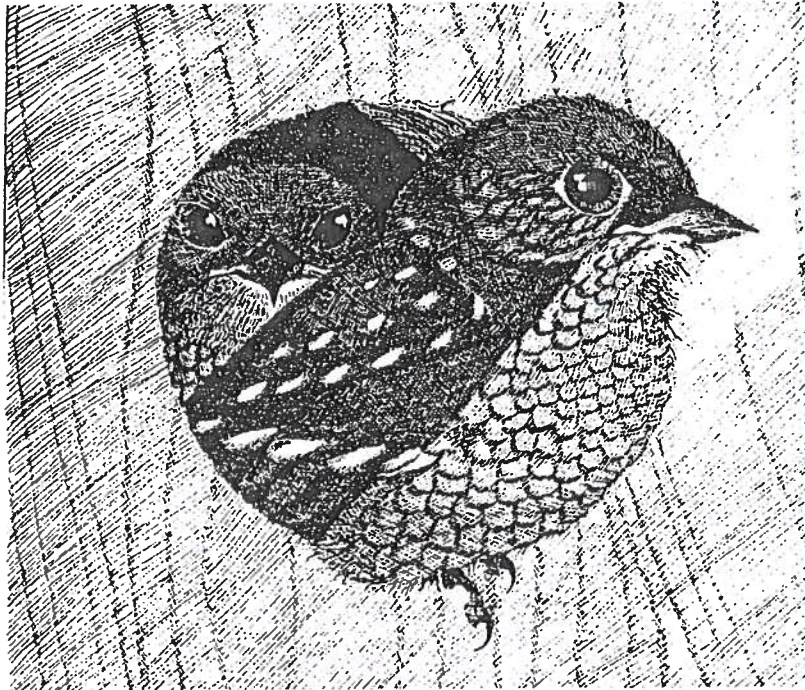
This fall I had a message on the telephone answering machine. It was the lady who wished to ask something about Bluebirds. When I called her, she told me a flock of Bluebirds were feeding on some dogwood berries in a land behind her house. She told me how the Bluebirds perched on the edge of the roof of her house and took baths in her dog's water dish.

A call to an old friend who has a small bluebird trail of less than a dozen nest boxes on his property brought more Blue bird news. My friend's boxes are shallow, just four inches from the bottom of the entrance to the top of the floor.

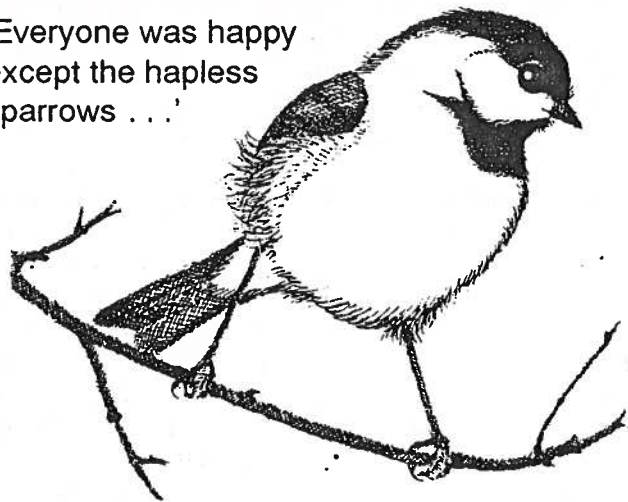
This year sparrows took over the boxes when the young were hatched. Blue Jays preyed upon the sparrow chicks, taking every one.

Another interesting happening was observation of Yellow-breasted Chats. One morning, while checking to see if any Bluebirds were around the nest boxes, I heard a harsh, hawk-like call. As I approached the area of the call, a yellowish bird about the size of an oriole flew from the top of a tree down into a thorn thicket. I could hear a bird making sounds something like an oriole scolding, alternating with a sound like a thrasher alarm call, but I could not see the bird. The next morning I took my binoculars and returned to the same spot. The bird was singing, yet for fifteen minutes I saw nothing. A breeze sprang up, pushing aside the fronds of an ash to reveal the Chat.

A couple of months later, just three quarters of a mile away, while checking a box with a Tree Swallow nest, I heard a bird calling that sounded like a Chat. I peered around a willow and there at the apex of a juniper spire sat a Chat. As I was leaving, I met the landowner who had previously informed me that really it was his wife who was interested in birds, but I noticed it was he who got the binoculars when I pointed out the Chat to him. The moment he raised the binoculars the Chat dropped into his pine plantation.



'Everyone was happy except the hapless sparrows . . .'



The next thing of interest were the Great-Crested Flycatchers that built nests in two of our boxes, laid one egg in one of the boxes, then abandoned it to nest in a neighboring Purple Martin house. I suppose it happened something like this. After the flycatchers build their nest, Mrs. Flycatcher saw the martin house and to her it seemed a castle in the sky. She said to Mr. Flycatcher, "Do you expect my to raise a family in a shack in the woods while those trashy birds live in that beautiful condo?" So Cres thumped the daylights out of the sparrows and booted their little tails out of the martin house. The flycatcher family then set up housekeeping and raised their family in the beautiful castle with a view and everyone was happy except the hapless sparrows. They tried vainly to nest in the Bluebird boxes. Every time they tried I opened the box and left it open. At last they gave up and nested in a dense juniper where they raised their family unmolested.

A MYSTERIOUS RED HEAD ON THE DETROIT RIVER

By Dr. Ed. N. Sickafus

It began as a cold winter morning. Preparations for going to work followed the usual routine. As matters turned out, however, breakfast was going to be a memorable occasion for two relatively new birders.

As I was finishing my cereal, my wife, Mary Sue, glanced out of the river-room window and noticed an usual duck near the sea wall. (We live on Grosse Ile, Mich.). We both got our binoculars and began to study what was to become our most interesting bird discovery.

The red head was the first thing that caught our eyes. The bird was moving around in a large opening in the ice with other ducks that it looked nothing like. We knew that this was a new sighting for us, so we concentrated on identifying distinctive characteristics.

This first encounter occurred two winters ago. We had forgotten it until a second encounter last summer.

As we watched the bird that first morning we noted as many characteristics as possible before looking at a field guide, lest the duck should leave before we had any agreed-upon features. It had a bushy red head, like a neat dense crew cut, a black vest, a brown, humped back, white sides, a dark face, and a bill that was difficult to make out but that seemed, for its width, to be elongated.

We noticed that the bird was spending most of its time following a female goldeneye that was busy diving to the bottom of the river in search of something to eat. It didn't dive with her but would hurry over to her when she popped back to the surface. There were three pairs of goldeneyes and several pairs of common merganser; but, this (male?) bird was a loner, without an obvious mate.

The other birds' preoccupation with feeding, and his posturing gave us time to check a guidebook. Although he didn't look like the mergansers he was with, he did have a red bill, and since he didn't remind me of anything I had seen before, I started with mergansers.

Nothing in the guidebook looked like this red head. My wife

and I spent a few more minutes with the binoculars, checking our observations, and then carefully compared every duck picture in the guidebook. Nothing fit.

At this point I decided to make a sketch. For fear that the bird might leave at any time, I quickly outlined this red-headed mystery and put a little color in each distinctive area. The rest would be filled in later.

Sketching in a standing position while juggling binoculars, pad and pencils does not lead to quality drawing. But I hoped that I could do a rendering sufficiently adequate to enable one of my birding friends at work to make a definite identification.

When I completed the picture, I put it in my briefcase and left for the office. As novice birders, our collection of references was rather limited. But none of my experienced birding fiends at work, much to my surprise, could identify this red-headed bird. They were very polite and did not criticize my drawing; they tried to take it at face value. By the end of the day, I had been provided telephone numbers -- for the local Audubon Society, the rare bird watch, the county agent, and the bird sanctuary at Point Pelee, in southern Ontario. I also acquired the feeling that, although everyone politely examined my drawing and listened to my description, there was an unspoken suspicion of my observation skills.

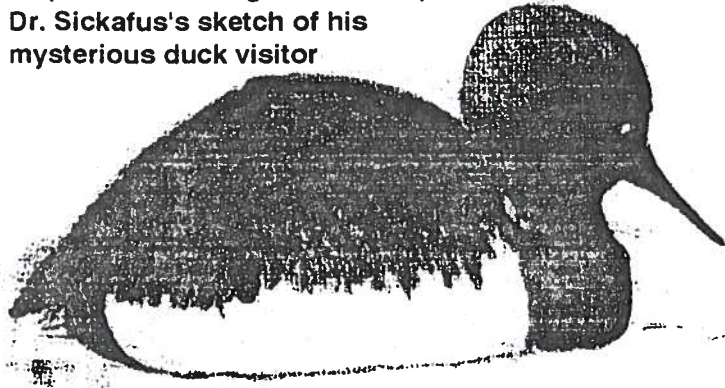
I called the Audubon number and talked with a kindly gentleman. He listened to my description and made several suggestions that we had already discarded. He offered to come to our house and see if he could identify the duck. I explained that we lived on a island in the Detroit River, about two miles north of the mouth to Lake Erie, and that ducks come and go every few minutes. Large numbers can be found in front of our house at any time during the winter, but these groups are in constant flux, so the chances of seeing the same duck a few hours later is quite small. He made a suggestion that made some sense, namely, that the bird might be a crossbreed or an immature. These possibilities dampened my hope for a rare sighting.

The next day a friend brought to work one of his reference guides with a picture of a female red-breasted merganser. In his

estimation it fit, somewhat, my verbal description (red head, red bill, dark back) but was not much like my sketch. Noting my disappointment, he pointed out the difficulty of accurate sketching in the excitement of a new discovery. In addition, he noted the unfavorable conditions under which I had worked: viewing with 9X binoculars under an overcast sky a moving duck that never offered a single pose for more than a few seconds. Furthermore, the bird's being in the presence of common mergansers and following a female goldeneye -- as well as my sketch of a merganser-like bill -- made crossbreed a plausibility.

After a few days, friends stopped inquiring about our red-headed duck with a crew cut, and he never showed up again in front of our house. Since there was nothing in the reference books like my description and my experienced birding friends had nothing of any help in their libraries, I dropped the matter. I did not notify any rare-bird sighting group and made no more telephone calls to bring the duck to anyone's attention. I wished,

Dr. Sickafus's sketch of his mysterious duck visitor



however, that there was some way to ask birders along the Detroit River to watch for him.

The red-headed mystery was forgotten until last July when Mary Sue and I travelled to Toronto with a group of friends to spend a weekend. In the first floor of our hotel was an atrium surrounding an outside, glass-enclosed garden. The garden had a waterfall, a pool, a birdfeeder and small birds that came and went freely. A pair of beautiful wood ducks seemed to be permanent residents. Wires strung overhead across the open garden prevented their escape, or maybe their wings were clipped; I did not inquire. But more importantly, there was one other duck -- none other than the red-headed, crew-cut mystery.

He was exactly as we had remembered him and sketched him; or as nearly so as I could recall, since I did not have my sketch with me. We were both excited about seeing him, and we got most of our travelling friends to look at him and listen to our story. No one seemed to share our excitement and none knew what kind of duck he was.

I assumed, since the garden was obviously maintained for the benefit of the hotel's guests, that guests would be inquiring about the kind of ducks kept there. Hence there should be an explanatory sign for that purpose. But none was to be found. I asked a young woman at the hotel registration desk if she knew what species the duck was. She said no, but offered to ask the management and then disappeared into the office area in search of a knowledgeable source.

Since no identification sign was provided, it seemed logical that there would be informed people at the registration desk who

dealt with such questions on a daily basis. I was somewhat surprised that the young receptionist working at the desk didn't have the information herself, but she was being very co-operative in trying to find an answer to my question.

In a few minutes she returned without an answer. "They say that they are mallards," she said, "but I'm sure that they aren't." I agreed with her and said that two were definitely wood ducks but that the odd one was the one we were interested in identifying. She offered to check with other staff members who might be coming in later in the day. I thanked her and left, disappointed.

I couldn't believe it; there we were, face to face with our red-headed mystery, and we still had no idea what he was. We both were gratified, though, that our observation skills were vindicated. Here was close-up proof that we knew what we were talking about a year ago (surely there would not be two identical hybrids), and we had witnesses to this encounter. But the red-headed duck's identity was still a mystery to us.

The next day, in search of information, we located a bookstore in a nearby mall. An employee I spoke with said that the kind of guidebook we were looking for would only be available in a university bookstore. It looked like another disappointment in the making, since we had no time to visit the university area.

But, meanwhile, my wife and two friends were at the back of the store, looking through a small book on ducks that they had found. (So much for knowledgeable employees!) Bob had found a picture of a red-breasted merganser which I explained was not the duck we were looking for. Then, upon turning a few pages, Pat found the bird. There, at the beginning of a section on European ducks, was a painting of our red-headed crew cut. He no longer was a mystery; he was, without doubt, a red-crested pochard.

The book was *Ducks* by Trevor Boyer and John Gooders (Gallery Books, New York, 1990), one of a series entitled "Canadian Nature Guides." Trevor Boyer's paintings of ducks in this book are beautiful, detailed renditions executed with draftsmanlike precision. John Gooders' description of the duck read: "The drake red-crested pochard is *instantly recognizable* by its bright orange-red head, contrasting with the solid black of the neck, breast, and underparts." Surely, I thought, Gooders meant "instantly" only in the case of those who had seen or known of the bird before. In our own case, it took a year to "recognize" him.

Range maps showed that the principal breeding areas for the red-crested pochard stretch from southern Spain through southern France, north to West Germany and Holland, then southeast through Europe to Asia, extending well beyond the Caspian Sea and covering a large area in south-central Russia. The species winters in these same areas, except for Germany and Holland, ranging south to Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, India and Burma.

I would like to add to this range information the sighting of a bird that made it to our yard on Elba Island, at the south end of Grosse Ile, Michigan, USA, at longitude 83° 08' 45", latitude 42° 06' 12", in the winter of 1989.

Reprinted from the November/December 1991 issue of *BirdWatcher's Digest* by gracious permission of Dr. Ed. N. Sickafus.

WINTER . . . AND A RED FOX TROTTING ACROSS A FIELD

By William H. Balkwill

While winter can be a bleak and austere time with roadways either icy or choked with snow, bitter cold winds driving the snow across the barren landscape and naked trees standing before leaden skies, there is also a beautiful side to winter. There is the beauty of snow silently falling, covering the bleak, drab countryside with a soft white blanket. There is the sight of soft snow sticking to the windward side of trees and limbs, making the woodlot lot like a stunning black and white etching. Then there is viewing the rising or setting sun behind a screen of leafless deciduous trees, the trees silhouetted against a flaming sunrise or sunset.

Have you been fortunate enough to see a red fox trotting across a snowy field, the early morning sun's rays bouncing from his coat? You may see many interesting stories written in the snow as you hike through the fields and woods. Under the majestic oaks you may come upon spots where snow has been pawed clear by deer to feed on acorns. Following a drag mark in the snow to a hollow log, you may discover that a weasel has cached the body of its victim. Again, following the track of the weasel, you possibly may come upon the chewed body of the weasel where it in turn was ambushed by a fox. You may see squirrel tracks as well as rabbit, fox, coyote, mice and bird tracks, all telling you who found food and who became food.

Have you ever on a cold, blustery day walked into a woods to find a still, serene world with snowflakes falling gently to the forest floor? The quietness is only broken by eerie squeals from crossed limbs as a sudden gust blows through the tree tops. As

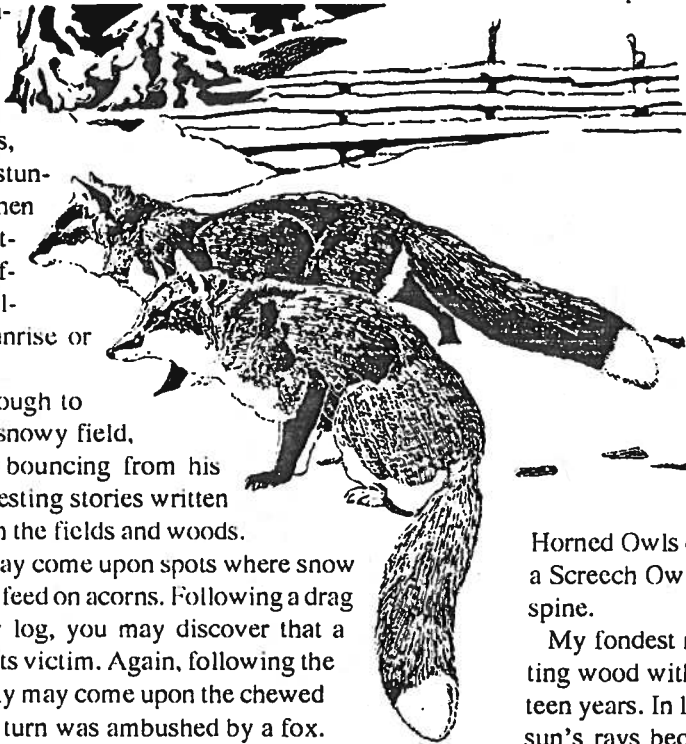
one wanders through this island of tranquillity, the thought likely to be on your mind would be the dash through the blustery winds to the cosiness of home.

Everyone at one time or another has witnessed, after a sleet storm, the sun breaking through the overcast sky and striking the ice-encrusted countryside, creating a dazzling, jewel-like landscape. Have you ever taken a walk in the

woods on a cold frosty night when the sky seems crowded with twinkling stars? A gigantic moon shines down on the freshly fallen snow, making the night almost like day. The trees cast long shadow. Whispering breezes rock the tree tops, causing the shadows to writhe. Small animals appear and disappear like ghosts as they move in and out of the shadows. It can be a bit unnerving the first time you hear the gunshot-like noise of the frost splitting the heart of a tree, especially if the tree is behind you.

I always enjoy hearing the Great Horned Owls calling back and forth, but the call of a Screech Owl never fails to send a chill down my spine.

My fondest memories are those that I spend cutting wood with my father during my pre-and early teen years. In late February and early March, as the sun's rays became warmer, the tapping of woodpeckers would turn into drumming that echoed throughout the woods. When he heard the woodpeckers drumming, my father would say that the back of winter is finally broken. Soon after that would come the sugar snows, big, fluffy, wet snow that covered trees and shrubs, causing them to bow under the weight. The sugar snow melts quickly. Some claim the maple sap had more sugar in it after this type of snow.



Fall Notes and News

Dinner well publicized

It's becoming a bit of a tradition that a display for the ECFNC's annual dinner and its guest speaker appear in the display cubes of the Main Library on its second floor during the month of October.

The person responsible for putting the displays in place is Anne Barbour. Anne gathers a wide range of materials and the result is always pleasing and informative. This year the focus was on our annual dinner and our guest speaker, Mike Cadman.

A display of newly published books for the auction was attractively arranged around the announcement of the dinner. In the second cube, Anne had placed a copy of the Breeding Bird Atlas of Ontario as the focus, with such memorabilia as a record card,

a copy of one of the regularly printed newsletters from the survey period, as well as a collection of colorful feathers and pellets left by Great Horned Owls near a nesting site in Essex County.

Mike Cadman was introduced as the co-ordinator of this ambitious project and the speaker for our seventh dinner.

Hawk Migration Display

A number of environmental groups, including the ECFNC, were invited to the Hawk Migration Festival at the Holiday Beach Conservation Area for the two-day festival held on Sept. 14 and 15. Our bulletin board displayed our Eastern Bluebird Box program and the display included a collection of actual Bluebird boxes of varying designs. "Thank you" to the volunteers who donated their time to inform the public about our club and its activities.



More notes and news

Display at Jack Miner Festival

The ECFNC had a display at the Jack Miner Migration Festival, held in Kingsville, Oct. 19 and 20. "Thank you" to Johanne Ranger who organized our display table.

Participated in Open House

The Open House at the Ojibway Nature Centre was attended by hundreds of persons. Our ECFNC had a display, as did the Sandwich West Environment at Risk Group. The SWEAR group was continuing its fund-raising activities with a bake sale during the Open House.

Little River Cleanup held

The fall cleanup of the Little River Wetlands was held on Saturday, Oct. 19, with the students of Concord School, graduates of Concord School now attending Riverside Secondary School, parents of students and teachers all joining together to remove debris from the old river bed of Little River.

The water level was at its lowest since the cleanups began. Such wonders as a swimming pool pump, a computer monitor and an ancient auto wheel with spokes were

exposed and dragged from the river bed. For this cleanup, a television crew from TVOntario came to Windsor to record the activities associated with the cleanup. The broadcast of the Little River cleanup is scheduled for early December as part of the Green Earth Club programming. Ian Naisbitt, a teacher at Concord School and an ECFNC member, is very much involved in this environmental project which has won the enthusiastic support of so many children and has won such acclaim.

Little River Bird List Growing

A number of ECFNC members walk along the paths of the Little River Wetlands with the result that a list of the birds observed at Little River is growing steadily. The birds observed this October include: Great Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, Canada Goose, Mallard, Red-breasted Merganser, American Kestrel, Killdeer, American Woodcock, Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Forster's Tern, Mourning Dove, Belted Kingfisher, Northern Flicker, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Phoebe, Horned Lark, Rough-winged Swallow, Blue Jay, Common Crow, Mockingbird, Gray Catbird, American Robin, Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Cedar Waxwing, Starling, Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, American Redstart, Eastern Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, Cardinal, American Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, White-throated Sparrow and Song Sparrow. New sightings are welcome and may be directed to Ian Naisbitt at Concord School.

SCRATCHINGS FROM A RELUCTANT FEEDER-WATCHER

By Susan MacKenzie

As far back as grade school I had the unassailable conviction that science meant doing monotonous things, a zillion times over, in order to record in fiddlesome detail some minute observation.

Yuck, sez I and turned to the allegedly more creative humanities.

So why do I find myself up at 7 a.m. on a Sunday, shivering while the house warms up, just so I can record the first junco to hit my feeders on the first day of my third FeederWatch season?

I've been seduced again into doing the hated "Science" in the guise of nature study. Erica Dunn, and all your cronies at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, do you realize the pain your horrible little forms cause those of us who only want to look at birds, not count the little beggars.

Oh sure, the first season was easy, even sort of fun. We got to describe the backyard habitat; to analyze the kind of feeding environment one was providing; to list the types of feed and feeders. True, the question about one's annual birdseed budget was painful to contemplate, but as long as Ms. Dunn keeps the figure confidential, not to worry. Wouldn't want to spark a run on Hartz Mountain shares.

And the first FeederWatch season proved a rather satisfying experience. For one thing, they asked us to count squirrels as a secondary project. Now swirling flocks of blackbirds in several shapes and sizes can pose a problem for the novice counter, no matter how you slice the grid. But a squirrel is a squirrel is a squirrel. Even if there are far too many of them.

Then, with a confidence born of distinguishing black squirrels from grey squirrels, one could tackle the various races of blackbirds and sparrows.

The mere fact of having to spend two days every two weeks assiduously gazing from the rear window puts one wonderfully in touch with the neighborhood. One learns who walks the dog in his pajamas, (the neighbor, of course, not the dog, although anything is possible on the outskirts of LaSalle); one sees who kicks the kids out to play at the crack of dawn; one cringes at the rats, big as cats, that have moved into the brush piles so artfully arranged for bird cover.

On the other hand, who would want to miss the cardinals who are there when the sun rises and back when the sun sets, a feeding ritual that shapes and orders the watcher's day.

Best of all, the enforced vigil at the window produces birds that one never dreamed were out there, simply waiting to be counted.

That first year I happily reported to Dr. Dunn and associates my ring-necked dove scratching about with the mourning variety. Never mind that the nearest wild bird is some place in Florida and mine was obviously the product of Colasanti's or some local aviary. That's a problem for the experts. This was an extremely pretty bird even if it wasn't strictly speaking countable, and I lavished cracked corn on it until it vanished in mid-December. By then though, its mourning dove relatives and theirsisters and their cousins and their aunts were mucking up

every window sill waiting for the corn they claimed as their due.

More legitimately the following February, I counted my first (and only) backyard thrasher, predictably foraging under the long-depleted raspberry canes. Figuring he liked fruit I set out grapes. That did it. For most of the dirty weather that followed, the household's fruit supply went out the back door to succor the thrasher and the all-too-numerous starlings that shared his bonanza.

Filling out the forms to record these marvels was another matter. One can't just write in numbers beside the appropriate bird name. It wouldn't look like science that way, and the computer that counts all this data wouldn't appreciate our numerical idiosyncrasies. Instead, we must carefully shade in little ovals (in a soft pencil only) to indicate our bird numbers. It gets complicated when one tallies more than 10 of a species. Then, we must shade both the 10 and the five to indicate the 15 blue jays or whatever. Damn! I never could color within the lines.

I discovered the best way to cope with the hated paper work was to take copious notes at my window-side perch and then set aside a whole evening to fill in the blasted forms. It was a pleasure about on a par with doing my income tax.

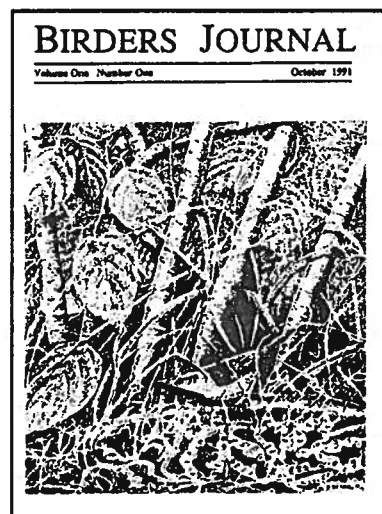
After the second year of counting I seriously considered passing on the burden to others. I heard from at least one much respected acquaintance who had decided she had made her contribution toward data collection. Then I started to look back through my records, summer as well as winter, all scrambled together in a coffee-stained weather diary.

The window vigils had become a habit. Without them I might have missed the tufted titmouse family that took peanuts all last summer. Or the early orioles that survived on orange halves skewered to a dead tree branch. Not to mention assorted nut-hatches, downies, and the whole catalogue of finches and sparrows. Even the five cats that line the window alongside me would miss their regular dreams of dinner on the wing.

So I sent Dr. Dunn another cheque. Who knows, some day I may even suggest that FeederWatch launch a summer bird count, so I can really complain.

New Journal for Ontario Birders

The first issue of Birders Journal, a bi-monthly magazine, was published in October by editors Brian Henshaw and Phil Holder. The focus is ornithology in Ontario, particularly current news and views. They are seeking both articles and artwork. Subscription price for 6 issues is \$30. Write 8 Midtown Drive, Suite 289, Oshawa, Ont., L1J 8L2.



TREASURERS REPORT - AUG., SEPT., OCT.

JULY 31/91

CURRENT	HERITAGE	RESERVE	TOTAL
590.93	6263.52	1594.16	8448.61

INCOME:

INTEREST	554.28	
SALES	81.00	
MEMBERSHIPS	135.00	
RAFFLE	18.00	
DONATION	167.74	
DINNER	720.00	1676.02

EXPENSES:

BANQUET	200.00	
BANK CHGS.	3.24	
DONATIONS	.03	
BLUE BIRD Com.	18.00	
TRANSPORTATION	17.00	
TELEPHONE	34.90	
EDUCATION	18.40	
RENT	74.28	
OFFICE SUPPLIES	29.65	
POSTAGE	63.20	
PRINTING	51.35	
CHEQUE RET.	15.00	525.05

OCT. 30/91

CURRENT	HERITAGE	RESERVE	TOTAL
1004.47	6999.93	1595.18	9599.58

ANNUAL DINNER MEETING REPORT (INCOMPLETE)

DINNER: TICKETS SOLD (80x20+3x12.50) 1637.50
EXPENSES 1618.87 / 18.63

RAFFLE: TICKETS SOLD 140.00
EXPENSES 40.20 / 99.80

AUCTIONS: REGULAR 901.00
SILENT 303.75

PROFIT 1323.18

Did you know...?

there are **12 Conservation Areas** within a few minutes of your home ,where you can

- Hike along wooded trails  go birding 
- relax at a sandy beach  have a picnic 
- enjoy family camping  paddle a canoe 
-climb a hawk tower  ski a wintery woodlot 
- explore a 19th century homestead 
- discover the mysteries of a marsh 
- or even catch a rainbow trout 

Mark Your Calendar Today!

- Jan.\Feb. - Cross Country Skiing - (conditions permitting)
- March 8. - Maple, The First Taste of Spring - J.R.Park Homestead
- March 21. - Bird-Box Day - ERCA Workshop, Essex
- April-May - Excellent birding - Hillman Marsh and other areas.
- May 1 - Family Camping - Opening day at Holiday Beach
- May 2 & 3 - Annual Trout Fishing Derby - Holiday Beach
- May 10 - Mother's Day Wildflower Hike - Cedar Creek
- May 17 - Spring Picnic - John R. Park Homestead



• Call or write for a FREE information package •
Essex Region Conservation , 360 Fairview Avenue West,
Essex, Ontario, N8M.1Y6.....(519) 776-5209

ACTIVITIES CALENDAR

- Thursday, Dec. 12 — Friends of Ojibway meeting; 7 p.m. at Nature Centre
- Saturday, Dec. 14 -- Cedar Creek Christmas Bird Count; volunteers call Paul Pratt at 978-1339 or 966-5852,
- Sunday, Dec. 15 -- Rondeau Christmas Bird Count; co-ordinated by Keith Burke - 676-2570.
- Monday, Dec. 16 -- Point Pelee Christmas Bird Count; co-ordinated by Tom Hince; Fax 322-1277 or phone 322-2365.
- Saturday, Dec. 21 -- Rockwood Christmas Bird Count; takes place in Amherstburg area; for information contact Paul Pratt.
- Wednesday, Jan. 1 -- Detroit River Christmas Bird Count; co-ordinated by Jeff Larson; 734-8145.
- Wednesday, Jan. 8 -- ECFNC monthly meeting; 7:30 p.m.; Anne Barbour will give a slide show on her recent trip to the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia.
- Saturday, Jan. 11 -- Chatham District Annual Waterfowl Survey; Club members will survey Essex County shoreline; meet at Ruscom Shores Conservation Area at 9 a.m.; for information call Tom Hurst at 839-4635.
- Thursday, Jan. 16 -- Winter Birding Introduction, organized by the Ojibway Nature Centre; 7:30 p.m. at the Nature Centre.
- Saturday, Jan. 18 -- Winter birding field trip, organized by the Ojibway Nature Centre; call 966-5852 for details.
- Sunday, Jan 26 — ECFNC field trip; walk along the old New York Central Railway line 1 to 3 p.m.; leaders Betty Learmouth and Ian Naisbitt; meet Essex District High School parking lot 1 p.m. Wear sturdy shoes as rails are still in place.
- Saturday, Feb. 1 -- Winter birding field trip; organized by the Ojibway Nature Centre.
- Wednesday, Feb. 12 -- ECFNC monthly meeting; 7:30 p.m. Bluebirds and Bluebird Trails, a presentation by the club's Bluebird Committee.
- Saturday, Feb. 15 -- Winter birding field trip, organized by the Ojibway Nature Centre.
- Saturday, Feb. 29 -- Winter birding field trip, organized by the Ojibway Nature Centre.
- Wednesday, March 11 -- ECFNC monthly meeting; 7:30 p.m.; a look at three nature parks in East Africa by Betty Learmouth.

ECFNC MEETING SITE CHANGES JAN. 8

Starting Wednesday, Jan. 8, 1992, the ECFNC monthly meetings will be held at the Union Gas building at 650 Division Road, Windsor. Union Gas is located just two buildings south of Devonshire Mall, between Dan Kane's auto sales and Leon's Furniture. Please use the south side Union Gas parking lot and enter the building's south door. It is felt that this new location should be equally convenient for both city and county members of the ECFNC. Hope to see you there in 1992.

— Tom Hurst

The EGRET, Volume 8, Number 4, December, 1991; newsletter of the Essex
County Field Naturalists' Club; P.O. Box 3241, Tecumseh, Ontario N8N 3C4

Address correction requested

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