

## Bluebird Program Update: June 15, 2023

The summer solstice is just around the corner. By June 21st, most first broods of Mountain Bluebirds will have fledged, and the Tree Swallows will soon follow suit. Once out of the nest, juvenile Bluebirds learn to feed themselves. The fledgling period takes between three and four weeks. During this time, the adult male usually looks after the young while—conditions permitting-- the female lays a second clutch of eggs. Once the second brood is ready for food, the juveniles often assist mom and dad with the feeding. By mid July or a little later, the two adults and the two broods leave the area as a family and join a post-breeding flock. According to Myrna Pearman in her 2005 booklet *Mountain Bluebird Trail Monitoring Guide*, where this large flock goes and why it forms is still a mystery (p. 13). In fact, she says that “much about the life cycle and natural history of the Mountain Bluebird ...is still unknown” (p. 1). Hopefully the data we are collecting in the Cariboo-Chilcotin will lead to a better understanding of Mountain Bluebirds.

June the 4<sup>th</sup> was an ideal day to gather nest box data on Becher's Prairie. A brisk breeze kept the mosquitos away, the temperature hovered around 20 degrees Celsius, the lighting was perfect for photography, and there were birds all around us. Vesper Sparrows in particular-- which can be identified by their pinkish bill, bold white eye-ring, and white outer tail feathers--were unusually abundant throughout our Becher's Bluebird route. Michaela and I observed them clinging to stalks of grass, perching on strands of barbed wire, chasing each other in the sky, and brooding on nests. On three occasions that I am aware of, we stepped dangerously close to well-hidden nests, nearly crushing the clutches of whiteish eggs covered with purplish-brown blotches. I paused to photograph one nest that contained four eggs. I also snapped a few photos of the many, many Vespers that I had to quit counting. For the first time in my memory, there were more Vesper Sparrows than mosquitos on Becher's Prairie!



Vesper Sparrow Nest



Adult Vesper Sparrow

There were a few other “firsts” during this year's Breeding Bird Survey: my first banded Mountain Bluebird, my first encounter with live Deer Mice in a nest box, and my first observation of a Tree Swallow brooding Mountain Bluebird eggs.

The banded bird is a female. Unfortunately, I only discovered that she was banded while viewing my photographs. In my photos, there are two yellow on the right leg and one metal over a brown band on the left. Even though I can't read the number on the metal band, I will report this sighting to Canada's

National Wildlife Research Center: <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/bird-banding/program-overview-contact-information.html>. Sandy Proulx also suggested that I contact Karen Wiebe and Russ Dawson. Both of these birding experts have banded in the Cariboo. I am very glad I did.

Karen Wiebe, recently retired from the University of Saskatchewan, is the bander of my bird. In 2021, she banded a yearling breeder which eventually fledged six nestlings. What amazed me is that I photographed this female very near where she was banded! She is now a third-year breeder and has likely been returning to the same box since 2021. At the time of my photo, her nest contained two unhatched eggs and three seven-day-old nestlings.

Thanks to banding studies in Canada and the USA, we expect that adult female Mountain Bluebirds which survive migration will use the same nest box year after year, and that their average breeding age is two. Three and four-year-olds are less common, and five-year-olds are quite rare unless raised in captivity (M. Pearman, *Mountain Bluebird Trail Monitoring Guide*, p. 9). Will my banded bird make it back for a fourth year? Thanks to the Karen Wiebe's bands, I will be watching for her arrival.



Banded Female Mountain Bluebird

My first encounter with Deer Mice was a bit of a shock. It is not unusual for rodents to occupy a box, but this has never happened on my route. In fact, I expected a Tree Swallow nest, since two had been trying to enter the box upon my arrival. Imagine how startled I was to discover two grey, whiskered noses twitching nervously. My guess is that they had been defending the entrance against the persistent swallows. Both mice retreated when I appeared, so I snapped a picture of one frightened creature cowering in the upper corner, and then--with some misgivings--I closed the face-board and made the entrance inaccessible to Swallows and Bluebirds alike. It was an old, discarded box that I had leaned against a dead tree. Let the mice have it!



Tree Swallow and Deer Mice Clash



Deer Mouse Cowers in the Corner

Discovering two Mountain Bluebird eggs nestled between six Tree Swallow eggs is something I have not seen, even after 35 years of managing the same route. Of course, the bluebird eggs are most likely infertile, but what if they are not? Will the Tree Swallows raise them?



Two Mountain Bluebird Eggs in an Active Tree Swallow Nest

A fellow Blue-Birder with many years of experience enjoyed a similar discovery on one of his routes. After the female Bluebird died, Tree Swallows took over the box and constructed a nest on top of her six eggs. It appears that one egg surfaced somehow, and then hatched along with the Swallows. Interestingly, the male Bluebird had not abandoned the nest box. In fact, he helped feed the five Swallows and one Mountain Bluebird inside. When the single Bluebird fledged, he then guided it into

the forest away from danger. So, stay tuned! I hope to re-open my “special” nest box near the end of June. Hopefully I will have an interesting story to share.

By the way, I would really appreciate a copy of any breeding data from this year or any other year.

And, if you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact me at [lmccsiz@gmail.com](mailto:lmccsiz@gmail.com).

Happy Summer 😊

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