



# the WILLET

*Beaverhill Bird Observatory*

Volume 17, Number 1

February 2004



**March 12-14 at the  
University of Alberta  
Earth Sciences Building 3-27**

**If you would like to present at the  
conference, please contact  
Chuck Priestley at:  
charles@ualberta.ca**

### ***Inside this Issue...***

Elson's Bluebird Trail.....	2
Steaks and Saw-Whets 2003.....	4
BBO's AGM Announcement .....	5
Nocturnal Owl Survey.....	6

### **COMOCO '04 Guest Speaker Announced**

Wayne Neslon will be this year's Friday evening speaker at COMOCO. Dr. Nelson is famous for his 30+ years of studying the Peale's Peregrine Falcons of Langara Island, Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia. Dr. Nelson has spent decades observing the courting, mating, nesting and feeding behaviours of the large sub-species of Peregrines.

His talk will be sure to be filled with interesting facts and amazing stories about these west-coast beauties. Come learn the differences between the natural histories of Peale's Peregrines and the Anatum Peregrines we find in our neighbourhood.

Come back on Saturday morning to learn even more about bird monitoring and conservation taking place across Canada. Saturday will be divided into three parts; bird observatory reports, special topics in bird conservation and monitoring and it will close with a special presentation.

Saturday's keynote speaker will be Jason Duxbury who will be speaking about the increasing use of stable-isotope analysis to investigate the ecology of birds and other animals. Dr. Duxbury will explore how stable-isotopes have been used track all kinds of species such as American Redstarts, Black-throated Blue Warblers, Willow Warblers, Burrowing Owls and Peregrine Falcons. He will also discuss how stable isotopes are used to study the diets of species such as Saw-whet Owls, Peregrine Falcons and California Condors.

The annual winter raptor field trip will take place the following Sunday. Come out and follow Edmonton area, raptor bander Al DeGroot as he and his fellow banders try to capture and band local raptors.



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## Elson's Bluebird Trail

*Lisa Priestley*

We thought we knew what we were taking on. Elson had been working with bluebirds since 1995, adding new boxes each year, expanding his network, checking them, banding the young, and working on catching the adults. We thought we could handle it . . . we were wrong. According to the records that were passed on to us, Elson Olorenshaw maintained 405 nest boxes east of Edmonton, near Elk Island, Beaverhill Lake, and Fort Saskatchewan!!

In remembrance of Elson, the Beaverhill Bird Observatory will be maintaining the Elson Bluebird Trail with the help of volunteers. The following are the results of Elson's work in 2002, which he was unable to report, and a short report of our results in 2003.

### 2002 Results – Elson Olorenshaw

In 2002, 125 Telus cans and 278 nest boxes were monitored. Only 62 nest sites remained vacant. A record 681 young Mountain Bluebirds fledged and 637 of these were banded. There were also two adult male and 17 adult female bluebirds banded.

Table 1: Results from 2002 monitoring of nest boxes (multiple visits).

Location (No. of boxes)	Vacant	Mountain Bluebirds	Tree Swallows	House Wrens	House Sparrows
East Telus (111 cans)	13	-3 nests -1 second nest -20 young fledge	-95 nests -488 young fledge	0	-1 nest -4 young fledge
West Telus (14 cans)	2	0	-9 nests -30 young fledge	-2 nests -10 young fledge	-1 nest (3 eggs) -unknown fate
Elk Island North (56 boxes)	7	-16 nest -18 second nests -163 young fledge	-28 nests -129 young fledge	-2 nests -4 young fledge	-1 nest (5 eggs) -unknown fate
Elk Island West (34 boxes)	1	-5 nests -9 second nests -71 young fledge	-22 nests -119 young fledge	-1 nest -4 young fledge	-1 nest -5 young
Elk Island East (120 boxes)	22	-20 nests -38 second nests -245 young fledge	-55 nests -279 young fledge	0	-5 nests -13 young
East Fort Sask. (62 boxes)	15	-16 nests -24 second nests -172 young fledge	-19 nests -87 young fledge	-1 nest -4 second nests -23 young fledge	-1 nest (5 eggs) -unknown fate
Beaverhill South (16 boxes)	2	-1 nest -1 second nest -10 young fledge	-3 nests -10 young fledge	0	0
Total (403)	62	-152 nests -681 young	-231 nests -1142 young	-10 nests -41 young	-10 nests

Of the 820 bluebird eggs that were laid, 718 hatched (87.6%), and 681 young fledged (83.0%). There were also 1142 young Tree Swallows and 41 young House Wrens that successfully fledged.

2003 Results – Lisa Priestley

Thanks to a team of dedicated volunteers, we managed to visit 262 of the 286 nest boxes, but were not able to visit the Telus cans. We found 55 bluebird, 88 Tree Swallow, 29 House Wren, and 11 House Sparrow nests. There were 66 nest boxes vacant in 2003.

We found many failed nests, with dead adults, young, and eggs. This was most likely due to a late winter snowstorm that reduced the food availability for nesting birds. A visit to Ellis Bird Farm (Bluebird group) during the summer also confirmed this finding throughout central Alberta. One of the more interesting finds was a family of Deer Mice that had set up house in one of the nest boxes.

Table 1: Results from 2003 monitoring of nest boxes (only one visit made).

Location (No. visited/ No. of boxes)	Vacant	Mountain Bluebirds	Tree Swallows	House Wrens	House Sparrows
Elk Island North (52/55 boxes)	17	-11 nest attempts -7 nests fledged -4 failed (5 dead young, 2 dead eggs)	-14 nest attempts -4 fledged, 8 young -11 dead eggs, 1 dead adult	-8 nests -2 failed/2 fledged -4 nests with 15 eggs, 6 young	-1 nest with 1 egg
Elk Island West (20/34 boxes)	5	-1 nest failed -1 renest (4 eggs) -unknown fate	-10 nests -16 young, 20 eggs -10 dead young	0	-1 nest being constructed
Elk Island East (119/119 boxes)	27	-29 nest attempts -14 failed (21 dead eggs, 9 dead young) -9 fledged -6 nests (7 eggs, 17 young)	-43 nest attempts -10 nests (32 young, 12 eggs), 20 nests fledged -13 nests failed (19 dead eggs, 16 dead young)	-3 nests being built -3 nests failed -3 nests fledged -2 nests (8 young)	-5 nests attempts -2 fledged, 1 failed -2 nests (8 young)
East Fort Sask. (58/63 boxes)	15	-11 nest attempts -5 failed (2 eggs, 12 dead young) -2 nests fledged -4 nests (11 eggs, 4 young)	-15 nest attempts -4 eggs/19 young on 6 nests, 3 nests fledged -5 nests failed (3 dead adult females, 14 dead young)	-10 nests -26 young -9 eggs	-2 nests fledged
Beaverhill South (13/15 boxes)	2	-1 nest -1 second nest -4 young fledge	-6 nests -25 young fledge	0	-2 nests -unknown fate
Total (262/286)	66	--	--	--	--

Thanks to Bryn Spence, Juanita Mumby, John and Debbie Spence, Margaret Takats, Chuck Priestley, Paul Newton, Mike Paustain, and Laura Horlick for helping with the Bluebird Trail in 2003. We hope 2004 will be even better, with more volunteers helping. If you are interested in taking a section of the Elson Bluebird Trail to monitor, please contact me at (780) 918-4804 or E-mail: [lisa@beaverhillbirds.com](mailto:lisa@beaverhillbirds.com).

## Steaks and Saw-whets 2003

*Chuck Priestley*

The torch flames danced that evening last fall. The smell of food being cooked over a bed of hot coals wafted among those who were gathered. The murmur of voices and laughter from friends old and new buzzed through the air. In the distance another sound could also be heard. The soft repeated whistle of the Northern Saw-whet Owl called into the night. The call was not coming from a real owl though. It was the fall, after all,



© Chuck Priestley

would show up. Thankfully, the second annual Steaks and Saw-whets barbecue did not disappoint in either area.

Temperatures ranged between 6.0°C and 9.5°C on Friday and between -1.2°C and 6.2°C on Saturday.

The wind was light and the moon was not visible on either evening. All in all, perfect banding/celebration weather. A new record for highest capture number on any evening was set on Friday of the Steaks and Saw-whets weekend. During



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not the breeding season. The noise, coming from a CD player, was meant to attract Northern Saw-whet Owls as they slipped silently through the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area. Those who were gathered had come from near and far to participate in the event. Steaks and Saw-whets 2003 was meant to be a celebration of fall migration, and celebrate we did on the evenings of September 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>!

Two of the main concerns we had leading up to this event were the weather, and whether or not any owls



© Lisa Priestley

the four-hour banding period, 13 owls were captured. Twelve of these were newly captured owls and one decided to stay around for a second visit that evening. Up to that point the highest number of owls caught in one evening was 9, a record set by Rich Krikun during the banding season of 2002.

After our slam-dunk evening on Friday we did not know what to expect for owl numbers on Saturday. Hopefully we did not catch all of the owls that were going to move through the area that weekend on the first evening, especially because we had so many interested people



coming out. Once again though the owls did not disappoint those who were gathered. Seven new owls were caught during the four-hour banding period on Saturday!

Participant numbers were also up this year. Thirty-six and 63 participants attended Friday and Saturday evenings respectively. Visitors came from as far as Calgary to participate in the festivities! It was great to see both familiar and new faces and in the crowd. Hopefully friendships that either start or continue to solidify at events like Steaks and Saw-whets will last a lifetime.

I look forward Steaks and Saw-whets 2004 and hope that you do to.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the Alberta Conservation Association for continuing to support the Beaverhill Bird Observatory's interpretation and public education programs. Thank you to CBC Radio, the Edmonton Journal and Global Television for helping us get the word out about this event. Volunteers Katie Morrison, Juanita Mumby, Lisa Priestley, Shannon Ripley and Enrique Valdez, assisted greatly with food preparation and cleanup. Thank you to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory board of directors for continuing to support the Northern Saw-whet Owl Migration Program. Lastly, this event would not have been such a great success without the participation of those who attended. Your presence and contributions are gratefully acknowledged!



**Please note that the BBO will be holding their Annual General Meeting in conjunction with COMOCO '04. If you are interested in volunteering with the BBO or if you would like to just attend the meeting, please meet in room 3-27 of the Earth and Atmospheric Sciences Building at the University of Alberta at 1:00pm**

## Calling All Insomniacs! Volunteers needed for Nocturnal Owl Surveys

Relatively little is known about the abundance and population trends of most species of nocturnal owls in Alberta. Most owls are not adequately monitored by the existing multi-species continent-wide surveys in North America.

Broadcast surveys are one of the most widely used techniques to locate and survey owls. Owls vocalize to communicate with their mates and delineate territory. Imitating or broadcasting tape recordings of owl vocalizations can invoke vocal responses from many species of owls. This survey technique has been used successfully to document the range and status of several owl species in North America, and can also be used to determine habitat associations.



Volunteers are needed to help run owl surveys during March, April, and early May. Only two nights (approximately two hours each night) are required for

these surveys. Volunteers will have routes assigned to them along roads, but can decide what area of the province they would like to work in. The volunteer will need a reliable vehicle (this is a roadside survey), a CD/tape player (we have some that can be borrowed), a flashlight or headlamp, a thermometer, warm clothes, willingness to learn the calls of the owls in your survey area, and lots of enthusiasm. We also recommend you have someone to survey with for safety reasons.

If you are interested in participating, please contact: Lisa Priestley, Beaverhill Bird Observatory, Box 1418, Edmonton, AB T5J 2N5. Phone: (780) 918-4804 E-mail: [lisa@beaverhillbirds.com](mailto:lisa@beaverhillbirds.com)

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### **NEXT WILLET ISSUE**

Material for the forthcoming newsletter should be sent to: Jason Duxbury, editor, The Willet, 146-52512 RR 214, Ardrossan, Alberta, T8E 2H1. Phone: 780-922-3326, Email: [jduxbury@telus.net](mailto:jduxbury@telus.net). Next newsletter deadline: May 1, 2004. Articles can be on bird banding, bird watching, wildlife viewing, etc.