



Remnants of the old irrigation system still evident today

## **The Wonder of Bluebirds**

By Doreen Wierenga

The first time I heard of bluebirds was when I was very young listening to the radio during wartime. The song, “There’ll be Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover” was often played. Little did I know that in the distant future, I’d become really involved with bluebirds. Bluebirds have been aptly described as having, “radiant blue feathers, soft round bodies, appealing little faces and gentle manner... Henry David Thoreau said that bluebirds carry the sky on their backs!”<sup>1</sup>

Because of loss of habitat, bluebirds are finding it harder all the time to find natural holes for nesting which is why we have bluebird trails or routes where bluebird boxes are installed. Open

grasslands are fast disappearing, losing out to development. Many holes in trees have been taken over by other species, predominately the invasive European Starling. The B.C. coast and Vancouver Island bluebirds have mostly been lost.

In the Okanagan we are lucky to have both the Mountain Bluebird and the Western Bluebird. Western Bluebirds are only found in southern parts of B.C. whereas the Mountain Bluebirds breed throughout much of the province. Last year I met a birder from Lillooet who has two bluebird trails several kilometers north of the town and she gets only Mountain Bluebirds in her boxes, never had a Western!

When people put in place bluebird trails, it doesn't take long before they are looking forward to what they will discover in the box each time and finding pleasure in having helped the bluebird population. Monitoring the boxes is a great opportunity to learn more about the birds. Western Bluebirds normally raise two broods a year, but it's still exciting to witness! Sometimes inside a box is a Tree Swallow or Violet-green Swallow and once in a while a House Wren or Chickadee. The mystery is what keeps people interested!

Bluebirds belong to the thrush family and like robins their young have a speckled breast which they lose with adult plumage. Their foraging methods are unlike thrushes, "They hover to catch insects or to pluck berries from branches and use a technique known as ground-sallying: flying from a perch and settling briefly on the ground to capture an insect before returning to perch."<sup>2</sup> Several years ago I was up on Black Mountain with another naturalist when we came across several Mountain Bluebirds. 17 of them were perched on wires and several were hovering over the field while we watched. It's the only time I have witnessed this hovering behaviour.

Bluebirds' diets consist of, "insects wherever they can find them, relying heavily on grasshoppers, crickets and beetles, saving the softer spiders and lepidopteran larvae for the younger nestlings."<sup>3</sup> They make up the rest of their diet with berries and fruit. Like all blue birds the feathers of the birds are not pigmented blue, "The blue colour is a result of the feather's microscopic structure: shiny blues that change hue and intensity with the angle of view are produced by iridescence (like soap bubbles)"<sup>4</sup>. Having such exquisite plumage, bluebirds may be forgiven for expending less brilliance on song than do other thrushes. Their songs are composed of simple call notes, strung together in short phrases.

Numerous books, poems and songs about bluebirds attest to our fascination with these beauties. They are certainly one of my favourite birds. If you want to get involved with the Black Mountain bluebird trail, follow the 'bluebird watch' tab on our website or get in touch with us, we'd love to include you.

Citations:

1. Bluebird Rescue, Joan Rattner Heilman. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books. New York, 1982, pg. 7

2. The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior, David Allen Sibley. Alfred Knopf, New York, 2001, pg. 460
3. Enjoying Bluebirds, Julie Zickefoose. Bird Watchers' Digest Press, 1993, Marietta, Ohio, pg. 6
4. Birds of Alberta, Chris Fisher, John Acorn. Lone Pine Publishing, Vancouver, 1998, pg. 266

*Photos by the late Scott Elliot of Kelowna*

