

Bluebirds Challenge Winter in Wisconsin

By Leif Marking

The Eastern Bluebird traditionally migrates in late fall to southern or gulf coast states to avoid the rigorous winters in the northern states that offer limited food sources and cold temperatures. During the past decade, however, many of the winter seasons have been milder than usual, and some bluebirds have ventured longer prior to migrating. Few were reported to stay all winter.

Despite recent drastically more rugged winter weather, unusual numbers of bluebirds are sighted and recorded in Christmas bird counts in many Wisconsin regions. A number of folks are communicating their sightings, and some are reporting that bluebirds are spending the nights in their empty bluebird nest boxes for protection from the cold. Many others report that bluebirds appear routinely in cold weather at their heated water bath or bird feeders.

Some folks are concerned the bluebirds might starve and they ask what kind of feed and cold protection to offer. My usual response to these inquiries is that bluebirds obviously survived in this country for hundreds of years without handouts of food or heated water in winter, and migration has been mandatory for survival.

So what has changed this past decade that would encourage or allow bluebirds to overwinter in Wisconsin? Certainly the half dozen milder winters were conducive for healthy populations of bird species to expand their winter range. Other factors include the increased interest and awareness of people to commit efforts to helping the birds with new and innovative bird-feeding technologies as promoted commercially by suppliers of bird feed.

Perhaps the most important attraction for keeping bluebirds in the region is the heated water bath, and sales of these have soared dramatically these past few years. Mealworms and other concocted feed items are now available by mail order throughout the year. Winter overnight roost boxes are advertised

to offer the birds protection from cold winter temperatures. Also many bluebird nest boxes are available for overnight roosting.

With the more severe winter conditions of 2007 and again in 2008 the situation has changed markedly. For example La Crosse WI, experienced all-time record snow accumulation in December with frequent below zero temperatures. An ice storm in early January 2009 covered much of the natural food items that bluebirds especially depend on for daily sustenance and survival. On January 8, 2009, the La Crosse Tribune Outdoors Section featured a photo of 10 bluebirds on a snowy, heated water bath, and many other newspapers and magazines were reporting similar sightings.

Many of these bluebirds may perish attempting to survive this year's harsh winter conditions as food sources dwindle. Good nutrition is vital in winter to maintain body temperatures sufficient to avoid hypothermia that often leads to mortality. This is also important to maintain the energy necessary for mobility to avoid predators. Bluebirds that are in poor health perhaps lack the energy and orientation for migration.

One of my bluebird friends has found two dead male bluebirds of the four that had been roosting in the box in her back yard. She had been cleaning and bedding the box routinely to improve their opportunity for survival. She offered them mealworms but they did not consume; their excretions contained various pits from berries. Her evaluation of this precarious situation was that these bluebirds should have migrated, and she would be willing to remove the nest box in winter to prevent another occurrence in the future. Other bluebirds are likely to perish this year in boxes that are not routinely monitored or in natural cavities.

The majority of bluebirds attempting to overwinter and those reported dead are males and most likely juveniles that have not experienced migration. They could be late season-born and did not mature sufficiently to gain the physiological character or incentive that leads them to migrate. Or they may have been born to parents that

successfully negotiated through moderate winters in Wisconsin. However, humans may well influence their migration patterns more in winter by offering desirable food, heated water baths, and nesting boxes for night roosting.

Bird experts maintain that wild birds receive only about 15 percent of their winter diet from bird feeders. They can survive comfortably without handouts. The feeders are actually supplemental. In fact, the greatest numbers of birds in this country live, survive, and thrive in environments that are devoid of handouts. There is good evidence that wild birds could survive without these handouts, but the handouts attract birds to the great pleasure and satisfaction of humans. Bluebirds and other insect-eating birds are not accustomed to feeding on seeds and fruits and do so as a last resort for survival. They are incapable of surviving most northern winters, and that is why they traditionally migrate to warmer climates in the winter.

So is climate change the primary reason for bluebirds to alter their inherited tendencies of migration? Or are human activities and innovations in bird feeding responsible for the bluebirds delaying or refraining from migration? If global warming develops noticeably in our lifetime, we can expect birds to respond accordingly. However, we must be more cautious in our generosity of handouts for bluebirds if we find that we are discouraging migration. I suspect there are many bluebirds in Wisconsin this winter that will perish in this bone-chilling cold. Some birders fear the stage could be set for heavy bluebird mortality.

I have a multitude of winter birds at my feeder constantly devouring sunflower seed in the absence of a heated water bath. We see no bluebirds lingering around the feeder and none are roosting in nearby empty bluebird nest boxes. For the sake of bluebirds, perhaps use of these seemingly harmless heated water baths by well-meaning people deserves further serious consideration.