

The Perfect Storm

by Kent Hall

Our goal of fledging 30,000 bluebirds from member's boxes took a real hit this season as we actually dropped 6,865 fledglings from our '07 record. There were two major reasons for this drop: weather and a loss of reports from several large trails from last season, the perfect storm for lost bluebird production for our 2008 Annual Report.

Weather: Peter Dunn reported at the Annual State Convention (Mosquito Hill Nature Center) that a drop in bluebird production occurs in seasons when the weather in the over-wintering grounds is especially harsh. I do not know what the weather was like on the over-wintering grounds last year, but I do know that bluebirds experienced especially harsh conditions when they returned to Wisconsin this season. Not only did we have a heavy snowfall last winter, the cold/damp weather continued through much of April and into May.

In central Wisconsin we had 6 ½" of slush snow on April 28; the 29th, 30th & May 1 were cold; there were cold rains on the 2nd & 3rd; and it stayed cold on May 4th, 5th & 6th. Data collected by our monitors showed no nest building or egg laying in our 963 boxes during this prime nesting period.

Was reproduction just suppressed

with bluebirds then extending their seasons, or was nesting lost for the season? It was the latter. Last season, our nest box adjusted--triple nests, totaled 50 and was an astounding 4 this season. This behavior shows that bluebirds simply "ran out of time to reproduce" after having a sustained repression of reproduction earlier in the season. I contend that the weather suppressed reproduction on our trail, leading to a 13% drop in production/nest box compared to last season (the poorest performance on our trail in the last four years). It should be noted that these data are consistent with those on our trail from the past four years—reproduction has ended at essentially the same time, each of these seasons.

I further think weather was a pervasive factor throughout the state in the decline of bluebird production this season (2/3 of those reporting last season and this season, had a drop in production/nest box). But, in addition to the cold, wet spring, we had heavy rainfalls in many parts of the state last summer. In Monroe, LaCrosse and Iowa Counties (perhaps others), there was higher than usual mortality of bluebird chicks. So far, the only explanation for these deaths has been black flies [= buffalo gnats; in spite of the use of unvented nest boxes; diagnosed by the Wildlife

New Trails	Fledglings	Total Boxes
Aldo Leopold Audubon Soc.	357	186
John Schübring (BadgerAAP)	160	45
Joanne DeVetter	112	32
Hoy Audubon	88	65
Neah Lohr (Mirror Lake 4-H)	79	40
Greenwood Hills County Club	77	34
Heidi Hughes	64	28
Storme Nelson (Hunt Hill Aud.)	42	10
Robert & Deb Bnada	24	7
Rosie Gotsch (Moundview GC)	7	1
Claire Romanak	7	10
Jolie Wood	-2	7
-----	1,015	465

Newly Reported Trails	Fledglings	Total Boxes
Bob Fox	304	112
Ed Mathwig	62	23
Steve Petznick (Mosq. Hill NC)	58	22
-----	424	157
Restructured Trails	Fledglings	Total Boxes
Ruthann Meiers (Navarino SWA)	90	33
Ellen Lafouge (Mee-Kwon GC)	66	25
Ray Glew (Donald Park)	19	24
Larry Dickerson (McCarthy Park)	8	10
Coleen O'Brien	-2	18
-----	171	110
GRAND TOTALS	1,610	732

Figure 1. Bluebird production as a result of OTS activities for the 2008 season.

Health Laboratory in Madison].

For those reports submitted for both the '07 & '08 seasons, there was a 15% decline in production/box from last season. If we consider this loss for our entire '07 production of 28,244 minus the under-reporting of 5,954 fledglings (see below), there was a decline of about 3,343 bluebirds because of weather this season.

Unreported Trails: Seven key reports from trails reporting last season were not filed this season. Four of these reports were from highly productive "mega-trails". These seven trails involved 1,131 nest boxes and 5,954 fledglings last season. There were several reasons for the loss of these trail reports including retirement & poor health or death, part of our perfect storm.

If one calculates a 15% drop in production from these trails because of poor weather this season, the number of fledglings lost from them is then 5,061, 74% of the 6,875 decline we experienced this season for the entire state.

How About the Future? If one adds the losses due to weather (3,343) & lost reports (5,061), they total 8,404, 1,539 more fledgling counts than were actually lost this season. Essentially all of this difference can be explained by the increased fledglings experienced from Operation Top State (OTS) this season (+1,610; see Table 1). In other words, without OTS efforts, our total drop in fledglings produced would have been 1,610 more than we recorded. Without the limitations of weather, the OTS number would have been very close to 2,000.

Our OTS counts from this season were 1,015 fledglings from newly installed trails, 424 from first-ever trail reports and 171 from restructured trails.

It is obvious, therefore, that our efforts to start new trails and to upgrade older trails is working. If we are to hit our 30,000 goal by 2011, we will need a continuing dedication to this effort. We are on track to add about 700 nest boxes to new trails and upgrade another 300 or so boxes from existing trails for the '09 season. If there are other BRAW members that would like to join this effort, please contact me.

Wisconsin Bluebird