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# The Bluebird Flyer

Newsletter of the Michigan Bluebird Society

## The Winter Distribution of Eastern Bluebirds in Michigan

By Kurt Hagemeister

It is no secret that many birds, including Eastern Bluebirds, have been changing their ranges over time. This is perfectly normal, as changes in habitat, food availability, and weather patterns can make conditions more favorable for breeding or wintering over in new territories. Historically, most Eastern Bluebirds in Michigan migrated to southern states during the winter. But, in recent winters, bluebirds in Michigan have been increasingly seen in larger numbers and are being seen further north within the state. I have personally observed this and heard it from many people. However, as President of the Michigan Bluebird Society and an engineer, I wanted more data to confirm this “theory.”

Also, as a compulsive collector of bird field guides, I’ve been dismayed that almost all of them have outdated and inaccurate graphical depictions of the winter range of Eastern Bluebirds in Michigan.

This led to my main goals in creating this article:

1. To eventually update major field guides to more accurately reflect the winter range of the Eastern Bluebird in Michigan
2. To help people realize that during the winter, bluebirds are in Michigan and need to be provided with birdbaths, plantings, food, etc.

First, one needs to realize that when looking at the distribution of any bird species in a range map format, it is **only** an approximation of where that bird is at different times of the year based on historical data. Second,

this distribution is never static. It is always changing based on weather, habitat changes, and long-term climate trends. You might see



Photo by Lynn Ward

bluebirds at the far northern end of the range map (or beyond) one year and absent the next.

Most field guides show the different ranges of birds in color codes based on the various cycles of what the birds are doing over

the course of the year. Typically these ranges are:

- winter range
- summer (breeding range)
- year-round
- migration only
- incidental (or rarely seen)

This article is mainly concerned with the first category – winter range. Also, note that when you overlay the winter range with the breeding range, the common area of both is the **year-round range**. My assumption is that the summer range includes **all 83** counties.

To determine a more exact estimate of where in Michigan bluebirds are routinely seen in winter, I turned to the two most reliable and readily available sources of information on winter bird populations:

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**Spring Bluebird Festival!**  
**March 28**

See Page 3 for Details

**Save Paper & Receive The Flyer by Email**

Help the MBS save money, paper, and resources.

If you would like to only receive this newsletter electronically, send us an email at [newsletter@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:newsletter@michiganbluebirds.org).

Provide us with a working email address where we can send you a link to download a PDF file of *The Flyer* each month. To do this, you must have the Adobe Acrobat Reader program installed on your computer. The program is free and can be downloaded at [www.get.adobe.com/reader](http://www.get.adobe.com/reader).

**Don't Let Your MBS Membership Expire!**

Please note that your MBS membership expiration month/year is indicated on the address label on this newsletter. Make sure to send in your renewal payment by that date. Remember, your membership dues go to support education and bluebird conservation.

## From the President's Perch

By Kurt Hagemeister



Happy 2015<sup>th</sup> year to everyone! I hope you are enjoying the nest box off-season but also eagerly looking forward to the upcoming bluebird season. I know I am. Every time I walk past my workbench area and see the pile of cedar boards sitting there, I get an itch to start building some more bluebird houses! If you're the same, but need a good bluebird box plan, make sure to

check out the downloadable plans at our website:

[www.michiganbluebirds.org/nestbox-plans](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/nestbox-plans)

If last year didn't go as well as you would have liked from a bluebird nesting perspective, now is a good time to make some **New Year's Bluebird Landlord Resolutions!** If you can't easily think of any, here are a few ideas:

- Pledge to monitor your boxes more diligently. If you skip even one week, you may miss a problem that can mean the difference between the success or failure of a nest.
- Resolve to move those unsuccessful nest boxes to new locations.
- Decide to rid your yard of the House Sparrows that have plagued your nest boxes for years. Put out the in-box traps, diligently watch them, and get rid of the sparrows.
- Feed your bluebirds mealworms during early spring when rain and/or cold snaps often cause nest failure.
- Discourage House Wrens from nesting on your property. To do this, remove wren houses, clear out invasive plants and shrubs, and locate bluebird houses away from dense cover. Although wrens are native birds, they don't need any extra help to nest and, more importantly, are highly aggressive toward any bird species nesting in their territories.
- Spread the word about bluebirds to your friends, family, and neighbors, and explain how they can help bluebirds.

January is also a great time to plan your year's activities – whether they be trips, projects, goals, or other events. One activity to put onto your calendar is the annual Michigan Bluebird Society **Spring Bluebird Festival**. This year's festival will be held on Saturday, March 28, at the Muskegon Community College. It will be a fun, educational, full day where you can meet fellow bluebirders, attend some fascinating programs, see the latest bluebird "stuff," and even take in an early spring nature hike. We'll also have lunch, prize drawings, and a Kids' Activity Corner. This big event has gotten rave reviews from members who have previously attended, and it gets better every year! Check out the next page for all of the details.

Finally, my wife, Liz, and I go to Florida every February for a get-away from the cold winter. And, of course, bird watching is always one of our favorite activities since so many species are there in winter. We're always on the lookout for bluebirds, even though we never see them along the Gulf Coast where we go. But, if you're going on a trip to another part of the country, I'd encourage you to look for bluebirds. If you go out west, you are likely to see the cousins to our Eastern Bluebird, the Western and Mountain Bluebirds. Many states have their own bluebird organizations similar to the MBS. Before leaving, take a few minutes to search online for the bluebird group in the area where you'll be, and see what they're all about.

I hope to see you soon!

## Board Members Needed!

If you have thought about getting more involved in the community and have some available time, please consider volunteering as an MBS board member. We are currently in need of people who want to assist with bluebird conservation, education, and running this growing organization. You will find it is fun being on the MBS board— not only because of the wonderful people currently involved, but also because it is a rewarding experience to be able to aid beautiful native birds, like bluebirds.

A board member position requires only a small amount of time each month, and you can volunteer for a job that fits your interests and past experiences. Although we hold our quarterly board meetings in the south part of the state, you can call in to the meetings using a teleconference feature, thus eliminating the need to appear in person if you live far away.

Here are board positions which need to be filled:

**Director-at-Large** - act as another resource to help make decisions

**Fundraising Director** - help to create and run fundraising activities

**Events Director** – help to plan and run our two main meetings each year

**Nest Box Monitoring Director** – coordinate monitoring activities around the state, collecting nesting data, and reporting

**Education Director** – coordinate MBS bluebird programs, create new outreach programs, help to generate more educational content for the website, etc.

No experience in these areas is required – simply a passion for helping bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting birds. If you have interest in any of these positions, PLEASE contact Kurt Hagemeister at (734) 663-9746 or [khagemeister@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:khagemeister@michiganbluebirds.org) for more information.



[www.facebook.com/michiganbluebirdsociety](http://www.facebook.com/michiganbluebirdsociety)

# Plan to Attend the 2015.....

## MBS Spring Bluebird Festival

**Saturday March 28th**

**9:00 to 4:30**

**Muskegon Community College**

**Muskegon, Michigan**



**FREE ADMISSION**

Lunch is \$7.50 for adults &  
\$5.00 for kids

### FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

9:00—9:45	Coffee/Refreshments—Meet fellow bluebirders.
9:45—10:15	<b>MBS Annual Business Meeting</b>
10:15—11:15	<b>Bluebird Panel Discussion</b> —Get your bluebird questions answered by our panel of experts.
11:20—12:00	<b>Gardening for Bluebirds and More</b> , by Melanie Manion Learn how to add natural food to your habitat that increases the number of bluebirds and other species to your yard.
12:00—1:00	Box Lunch— Visit the Bluebird Expo and Kids' Activity Area.
1:05—2:05	<b>Birding by Ear</b> , by Jim McGrath of Nature Discovery Learn how to identify birds by their calls, and learn about smart phone apps to assist in bird-call identification.
2:05—2:25	Break—Visit the Bluebird Expo and Kids' Activity Area.
2:25—3:25	<b>Bluebird &amp; Other Conservation Efforts at the Muskegon County Wastewater Mgmt. System</b> , by Anita Friend
3:25—3:45	Break—Visit the Bluebird Expo and Kids' Activity Area.
3:45—4:15	<b>Getting Started in Bluebirding</b> , by Kurt Hagemeister Learn the basics about putting up and managing nest boxes.
4:30	Adjournment, followed by an optional <b>Nature Hike</b>

**HOTELS:** MBS has a special price worked out with the **Fairfield Inn & Suites** at 1520 East Mt. Garfield Rd. in Norton Shores (\$89 per night plus tax). This is a savings of \$10 per room. **However, you must call by February 28th to receive this rate.** The hotel can be reached at (231) 799-0100.

**DINING:** For those arriving on Friday, MBS has organized an informal dinner at *The Lake House Waterfront Grille* in Muskegon. They are located at 730 Terrace Point Drive. Call them at (231) 722-4461 for directions, or go to [www.thelakehousemi.com](http://www.thelakehousemi.com). See you there!

### Visit the Bluebird Expo



**Going on all day. You'll be able to buy.....**

- Nest boxes
- Sparrow Traps
- Poles
- Bluebird Gifts
- Bluebird Feeders
- Mealworms
- MBS shirts & hats
- Books

**And MORE!!**

**Directions:** The Muskegon C.C. main building is located at 221 Quarterline Rd. in Muskegon. Meeting is in the Collegiate Hall & Blue and Gold Room. Reach the college at (231) 773-9131 or [www.muskegoncc.edu](http://www.muskegoncc.edu)

### To Register:

Help us plan for food and seating by either calling Lynette Myers at (517) 206-7066 or emailing her at [membership@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:membership@michiganbluebirds.org). Make sure to leave your name, phone number, and the number attending. You can also register online at the MBS website: [michiganbluebirds.org/festival](http://michiganbluebirds.org/festival).

## The Winter Distribution of Eastern Bluebirds in Michigan

(Continued from page 1)

1. The Audubon Christmas Bird Count historical data
2. The Great Backyard Bird Count data from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

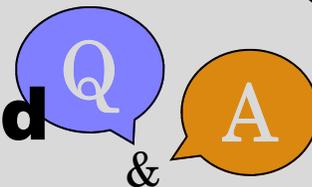
The **Audubon Christmas Bird Count** data is gathered in prescribed count areas from mid-December to early January in many areas of the country. The National Audubon Society coordinates the event and consolidates all the data nationally as reported from the local Audubon affiliates. The limitation of this data, however, is that each local count only encompasses a circular area with a 15-mile diameter. The data can tell us of the presence of bluebirds in a local area but not the population density. Also, the counts do not cover every county in the state, so populations of winter birds in these counties can't be easily verified.

The **Great Backyard Bird Count**, conducted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which is sponsored by Cornell University, gets average people involved in observing birds in their backyards and neighborhoods during the winter. This is usually in mid-February. The program has grown in popularity over the years and has a relatively large number of people involved in submitting data. However, coverage of areas can be sporadic, especially in rural areas where there are few or no people participating in the count. And, like the Christmas count, it can only tell us of the presence of birds in an area and not how numerous they are.

Therefore, between the two data sets, it gives us a pretty good picture of whether bluebirds (or any other species of bird) are wintering over in a geographic area. In other words, if bluebirds are present in a county of Michigan in late December/early January and also in mid-February, it is a good assumption they are wintering over for the whole season. And, if bluebirds show up in multiple years with

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## Bluebird



**Q. With all of this cold weather, how do bluebirds survive the long Michigan winters?**

A. One key survival tactic of bluebirds is to seek sheltered areas during cold weather. These typically have more trees and dense shrubs than their open-nesting season habitat. Shelter will help the birds make it through long nights and help them conserve calories. A second survival tactic is the bluebirds' ability to adapt their diets to natural food, like berries and some seeds. Even in winter, there are usually a lot of berries left over from the fall – at least in the lower part of the state where there are many deciduous trees and bushes. Finally, like all birds, bluebirds have superb thermal insulation from their feathers and the ability to slow down their metabolism at night to conserve energy.

**Q. Do bluebirds eat much feeder food?**

A. No, not generally. However, during extremely harsh conditions (deep snow and extreme cold) or near the end of winter when natural food has become very scarce, bluebirds will sometimes come to feeders. If they do, their favorite food choices are suet, hulled sunflower seeds, and peanut butter. There is a popular recipe for a winter food you can make that contains some of these ingredients, as well as raisins and cornmeal. You can find the recipe on our website page on **Feeding Bluebirds**. However, many bluebird enthusiasts have found that live mealworms are the easiest way to attract bluebirds to feed. These can be purchased at bird-feeding specialty stores, online, or at some pet food stores. Putting mealworms in an open tray feeder made of glass, metal, or plastic works best. Again, visit our website [www.michiganbluebirds.org/feeding-bluebirds](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/feeding-bluebirds) for details on how to feed mealworms.

### Please Join Us in Our Efforts to Help Michigan's Eastern Bluebirds to Thrive.

Now is the perfect time to help by joining the MBS or renewing your membership.

**Here are some easy ways to join MBS:**

- Fill out this form and mail it with your check.
- Phone our membership chairman, Lynette Myers (517) 206-7066.
- Join online by going to [www.michiganbluebirds.org/join-mbs](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/join-mbs)

Please indicate your preferred membership:

- One-year individual or family—\$15.00
- Three-year membership—\$40.00
- Corporate membership—\$125.00

- Lifetime membership—\$300.00 (includes free MBS logo shirt)
- I will make a donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_
- I have time to volunteer.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Mail your check, made payable to Michigan Bluebird Society, with this completed form to: **Michigan Bluebird Society, P.O. Box 2028, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-2028**



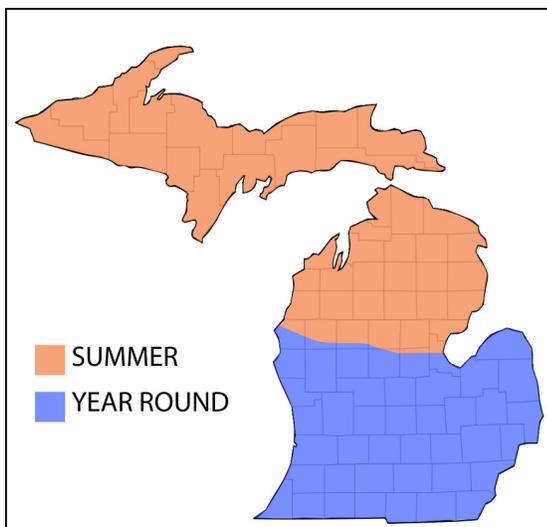
# The Winter Distribution of Eastern Bluebirds in Michigan

(Continued from page 5)

## Conclusions:

Despite geographic holes in the sighting data, the overall data clearly supports that Eastern Bluebirds are found regularly in Michigan in the southern two-thirds of counties in the Lower Peninsula. And, since the sightings occur both in late December and mid-February, the indication is that many birds are spending the entire winter in these areas. However, the one notable difference in the two data sets is the sightings in December in the northwest counties that don't reoccur later in the winter. This might indicate that the bluebirds are there early in the winter season when natural food is still relatively abundant, but then migrate south or even inland when the winter worsens. I posed this question to long-time Northern Michigan naturalist and birdwatcher, Tom Ford, of Traverse City, and he agreed that this was plausible. He added that they have only had "maybe up to three mid-winter bluebird sightings in the past decade."

Realizing that any line drawn on the map to indicate a northern extent of bluebirds in the Lower Peninsula would be somewhat arbitrary, a good conservative estimate, based on the data, would be a line going from the middle of Saginaw Bay west across the state. It is my hope that the range map below be adopted as the "latest and greatest" estimate of the distribution of Eastern Bluebirds in Michigan, at least until more specific and comprehensive data is collected.



Map by Peggy Falk

I greatly welcome any comments or feedback on this article. Please send them to [khagemeister@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:khagemeister@michiganbluebirds.org).

## Sources of Data:

<http://netapp.audubon.org/cbcobservation/>

<http://gbbc.birdcount.org> (Click on Explore Data)

*Kurt Hagemeister is President of the Michigan Bluebird Society.*

## Thank You!

The MBS is grateful to the following people who have recently joined, renewed, or donated money.

### WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Kathy Bates – Battle Creek  
Douglas Brehm – Muskegon  
Kaitland Marek – Grand Rapids  
Patricia Senagore – Cleveland, OH

### WELCOME BACK, RENEWING MEMBERS!

Steve & Cheryl Eno – Raymond, NE  
North American Bluebird Society – Bloomington, IN  
Norm Ochs – White Cloud  
Preble Paustian – Niles  
Bud & Jo Riggs – Adrian  
Stan Smolinski (Lifetime) – Metamora  
Connie Spotts – Clark Lake

## MBS News Briefs

### Notice of Proposed Bylaws Revision

The Michigan Bluebird Society bylaws were created in 2004 when the organization was formed and have not been changed much since. Over the last year, the board has been reviewing the bylaws with the intent of making changes necessary to better serve the membership. The board has drafted a proposed new set of bylaws which, after February 15th, can be viewed at [www.michiganbluebirds.org/MBSbylaws.pdf](http://www.michiganbluebirds.org/MBSbylaws.pdf)

Per Article XVII of the current bylaws, we will vote on the proposed changes at the annual business meeting in Muskegon on March 28th to decide whether the revised bylaws will be adopted. If you will not be there, you may mail a signed proxy (page 1 of the online document) to the MBS business address as written on the mailing panel. Proxies must be received by March 24th to be counted.

### MBS Store—New Items

Keep an eye on the MBS store page on our website for many new items this year. We have a new Sparrow Chaser—an easier-to-install version of the Spooker. And we'll be adding new T-shirts, a coffee mug, license plates, and more in the near future. Remember, all net proceeds from the store sales go to help bluebird conservation and MBS educational efforts.

# About The Michigan Bluebird Society

**Our Mission: To improve the nesting success of the Eastern Bluebird and other native cavity-nesting birds in the State of Michigan through education of our members and the general public, as well as promoting active nest box management and habitat improvement.**



*The Bluebird Flyer* is a publication for the members of the Michigan Bluebird Society. It is published four times a year: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Contributions, including articles and photos, are very welcome and can be emailed to: [newsletter@michiganbluebirds.org](mailto:newsletter@michiganbluebirds.org) or mailed to: **The Michigan Bluebird Society, P.O. Box 2028, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-2028.** Articles must be related to bluebirds or other cavity-nesting birds. The MBS retains the right to refuse article submissions. Non-profit, nature-related groups are encouraged to submit press releases of events and every effort will be made to find space in *The Bluebird Flyer*. Advertising is NOT accepted at this time. No reproductions of any material in this newsletter are permitted without permission from the MBS.

The Michigan Bluebird Society (MBS) was founded in 2001 and organized in 2004 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the state of Michigan. The MBS is an affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society.

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# 2014 Nesting Season Data Summary

The nesting season in 2014 clearly got off to a slow start in almost all areas of the state due to what was probably the worst winter in most of our memories. Snow and ice lingered into late March in many areas, including the lower part of the state. The harsh weather likely resulted in a greater loss than normal of bluebirds wintering over.

Further, it seems that the northern parts of the state were greatly affected in terms of the number of bluebirds fledged. Greg Miller in Benzie County and Bob Otto in Emmet County, both of whom monitor large trails, reported significantly lower numbers of bluebirds fledged. Tom Comfort, who monitors 30 box locations in Antrim County, reported a much lower percentage of second broods – maybe attributable to the late start of the nesting season.

However, the lower part of the state, from where the bulk of the reports were received, had better nesting results on average, with some people reporting excellent nesting success rates. In summary, the results were mixed and, in total, turned out much better than what could have been, given the harsh winter.

One clear trend, reported statewide, was the **much** greater prevalence of House Wrens. There is no explanation for this, and it is difficult to determine the total effect the wrens' prevalence had on bluebird nesting. Clearly though, there were more nest losses to wrens than normal.

We received 51 nesting season reports compared with 57 last year. This represented 77 separate trails and came from 22 different counties. We received more reports this year from single yards or small trails compared with 2013, resulting in the 17.6% drop in average number of boxes per trail. The

good news is that, despite this drop, the 1,574 total bluebirds fledged in 2014 wasn't too far below 2013's reported total of 1,667. And in 2014, the productivity of each box improved to 3.9 fledglings per successful nest from 3.7 last season.

The use of the Steve Gilbertson nest box designs (PVC, Gilwood, and Gilfort) notably increased. As older, existing boxes wear out, they will be replaced with these newer, more effective designs, but this transition will take time.

The MBS greatly appreciates all the reports we received and the extremely valuable anecdotal comments on what happened on various trails. Combined with the data, the commentary enables us to create a clearer picture of the overall nesting season results.

Please note, too, that we have a new **MBS Monitoring Form** that you can use to record nest-check data each week. The form is available to download from our website on the **Monitoring Nest Boxes** page.

2014 MBS Nesting Data Summary			
	2014	2013	% Change
No. of Trail Reports Submitted	51	57	-10.5%
Total Number of Nest Boxes	1,007	928	8.5%
Avg. # of Boxes per trail	13.4	16.3	-17.6%
Total Number of Bluebirds Fledged	1,574	1,667	-5.6%
Avg. # Successful Nests per box	0.40	0.45	-11.9%
Avg. # Fledglings per successful nest	3.94	3.69	6.9%
Avg. # Bluebirds Fledged per box	1.56	1.68	-7.0%
% of Trails using Traditional or NABS boxes	86.0%	78.9%	7.1%
% of Trails using either Gilwood or Gilbertson Box	44.0%	35.1%	8.9%
% of Trails using Peterson boxes	32.0%	29.8%	2.2%

