

# Okotoks Fish and Game

## Mountain Bluebird Nest Box 2020 Update

In March of 2019, 13 Bluebird nest boxes were set west of Okotoks (see map on page 3). There are other nest boxes set in the area, but despite efforts to locate the group(s) that maintain those boxes (including emails and phone calls), none were found. As Bluebird nest boxes should be placed widely apart, all locations chosen were placed an appropriate distance from the other boxes. There is room to accommodate many more. All landowners were contacted for permission to place nest boxes along their fencelines. After the boxes had been placed, we were contacted by a group with concern the club was moving in on their territory. This did not become an issue, as we invited the certified bird banding group to simply add any of our boxes to their current trails. They were happy to do so. Should we wish to make more boxes in the future, we now know the group to contact regarding placement and specifications for box design. By placing these boxes, the club not only helped native species by providing needed nesting habitat, but also informed another conservation minded group of our concern for all wildlife. As one of the banders corresponded, "I always thought Fish and Wildlife (Game) was interested only in habitat related to water birds such as ducks, for obvious reasons, so was delighted to become more familiar with your organization."

March of 2020 the nest boxes were checked and readied for the spring nesting season. The single box in location 1 (see map on page 3) had been removed by the banding group as they repaired the damaged box that was in that location. All other boxes were checked and emptied of old nesting material to allow for new occupation. Many of the lids were in need of repair, so simple hinges were installed to make them more secure and easier to maintain. Most boxes showed signs of occupation last year by either Tree Swallows or Bluebirds (this can be determined, with some degree of certainty, by noting the nesting material used). With luck, there will be occupation this spring by these beneficial native species. During the nesting season of May through July, club members are welcome to observe the nests (from a distance is best to not disturb nesting birds) and note what birds are occupying the boxes.

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## Mountain Bluebird Nest Box Project 2019

### History

Mountain Bluebirds are an iconic songbird in western Canada. Males are a striking sky blue color. Females are more drab, but also exhibit blue coloration throughout their gray plumage. Like many species, Mountain Bluebird populations are under threat from changes to the landscape. The most significant threat is competition for nesting sites with invasive species—Starlings and House Sparrows. These aggressive species take over traditional nesting cavities and have had a significant detrimental affect on Mountain Bluebird populations. Due to the efforts of various conservation groups, by building and maintaining Bluebird nest boxes, populations have rebounded and stabilized. But, upkeep and continued monitoring are required to keep populations healthy.

### Nest box construction

Nest boxes to accommodate Mountain Bluebirds should be made with a hole size of 1 9/16" to eliminate occupation by House Sparrows and Starlings. Bluebirds do not require a perch on the box, and leaving them off eliminates the possibility of invaders from perching, reaching in and killing the young. Interior dimensions should be close to 5 1/2" square and 9-10" tall, with weep holes in the bottom to allow for drainage. Bluebirds commonly have 2 broods per year, but can have more if conditions are favorable. Males will arrive in late March and begin establishing territories, with suitable nesting habitat, soon after. For the best chance of occupation, nest boxes should be hung before the end of March, but still can be occupied if in place by late April.

### Club nest box project

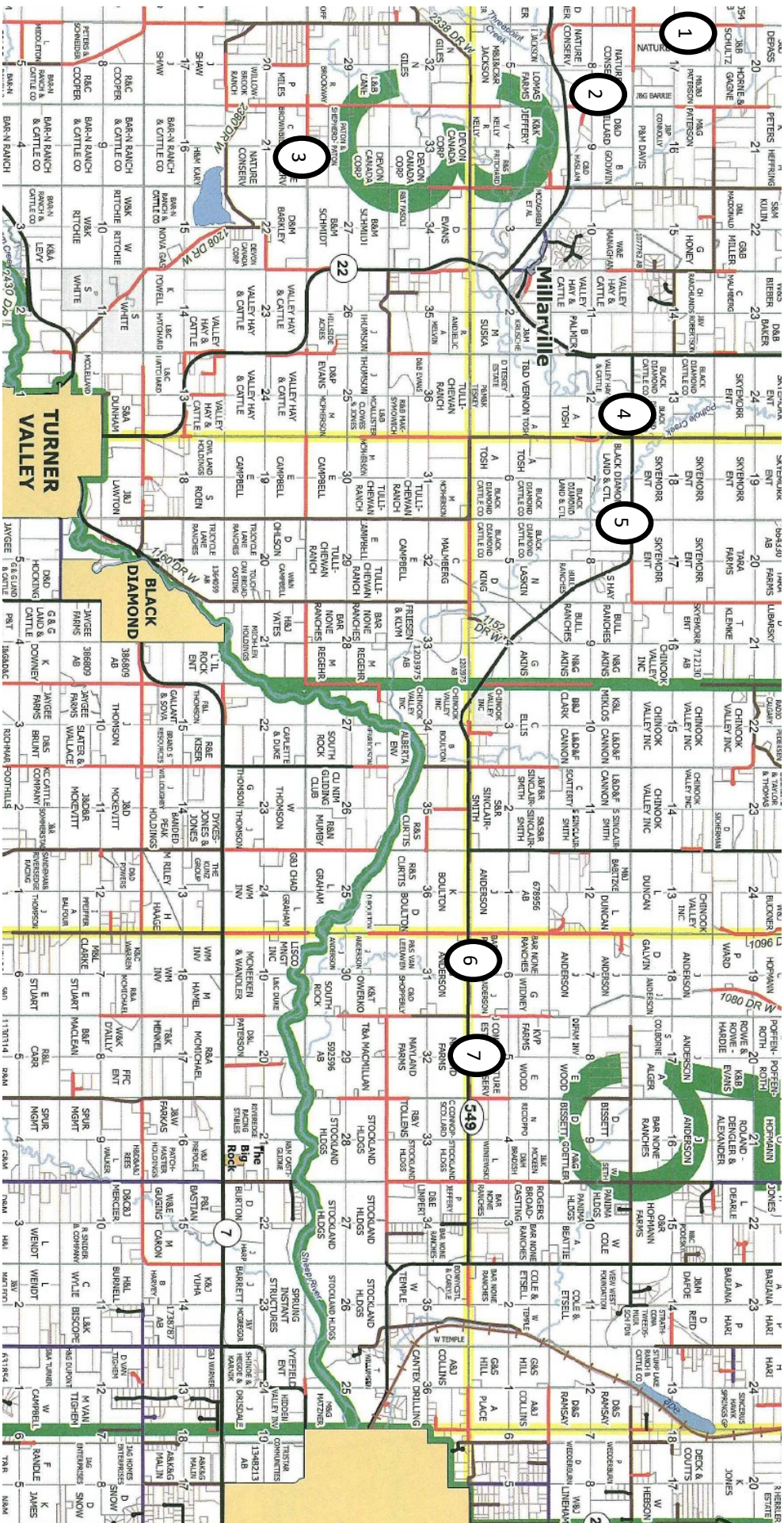
13 nest boxes were hung this spring, in late March, west of Okotoks. Six pairs were set and 1 matched with an existing box. The existing box was in a state of disrepair but was fixed and allowed for a double set with the uneven number of available boxes. The reason for pairing boxes is another native species, Tree Swallows, will often take over a single box. However, they will not tolerate another pair of Swallows close by but will tolerate a Bluebird pair. Double sets allow for both species to gain nesting habitat. Bluebirds are territorial so sets should be, depending on local habitat, a minimum of 300 meters (or so) apart. NCC (Nature Conservancy of Canada) was contacted to put boxes along their properties. Space for the nest boxes was found along some NCC property, but existing boxes were found, so a few private landowners were also approached. All landowners contacted were happy to accommodate boxes along their property. Boxes were not placed particularly close to any houses as non-native predators, specifically roaming house or feral cats, are a significant threat to Bluebirds and many other native songbirds. Boxes were sprayed with the club name and website address clearly shown. The following page shows where the boxes are located, west of Okotoks. One set, in particular, is along part of highway 549 where lines of vehicles are often delayed trying to access the Millarville farmers market. Good visibility for the club, but also good Bluebird habitat in the area. With luck, our boxes will provide appropriate nesting habitat and more Bluebirds in our area in the future.



Photo credit: Audubon.org







## Okotoks Fish and Game 2020 Bluebird house locations

\*-the box in location #1 has been removed.