

**ALABAMA SNOWSTORM DEADLY FOR
EASTERN BLUEBIRDS (*SIALIA SIALIS*)**

John Findlay, III

It was aptly reported as “the Snowstorm of the Century.” The late winter storm was unprecedented with blizzard-like conditions the night of 12 March 1993. Central Alabama bore the brunt of the heavy, wet snow, which averaged 12 to 17 inches in depth. It caused great inconveniences and many emergencies for those unable to cope with its destruction and utility outages.

The storm and the cold that followed proved deadly for many of our Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*). A total of 53 bluebirds was found dead in 20 of my approximately 180 trail boxes. It was the worst weather related disaster I have experienced in my 17 years of bluebird trail management. Most of the dead birds were found in boxes located in Oak Mountain State Park just south of metropolitan Birmingham. This largest state park in Alabama was completely isolated by the snowstorm’s fury that downed thousands of trees causing power and travel interruptions.

As many as ten dead bluebirds (five male, five female) were found huddled together in one box in a desperate attempt to stay alive (Figure 1); another box held six. Other boxes contained one to three dead birds. Many had already paired and selected nesting sites. However, none had started nest construction.



Figure 1. Dead bluebirds found in one of the author’s boxes at Oak Mountain State Park south of Birmingham. A total of 53 bluebirds was found dead in 20 of approximately 180 boxes. (Photo by John Findlay, III)

ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

A lack of food during and immediately after the heavy blanket of snow probably weakened the birds causing an inability to produce a sufficient amount of body heat to survive. This was greatly worsened as official Birmingham temperatures fell to nine degrees F. the first night after the storm's passage on 13 March, and to two degrees F. the night of 14 March. Wind chills dropped the temperature well below zero both nights.

Unlike many bird species that can survive on feeder handouts, bluebirds, for the most part, do not frequent feeders. Their normal diet of insects was unavailable and wild berries, often their late winter survival food, had already been stripped from the trees and shrubs by other species. It was a desperate situation for the bluebirds at a critical time of the year.

After rechecking my boxes as soon as I could after the storm, I placed a "Bluebird Alert" in the Birmingham newspapers. This was done to urge area bluebirders to recheck boxes before nesting season got underway. Many calls were received reporting dead bluebirds. A more complete assessment of the snow-cold effect on the bluebird population was realized. Bob Sargent of Trussville had 42 dead bluebirds in 81 boxes. George Cusick of Leeds reported six dead in one of his 16 boxes; he hadn't seen a bluebird on his property since the storm. . . a wipeout? Similar calls came in from numerous other central Alabama communities. . . Chelsea, Harpersville, Westover, Bessemer, etc.

The storm traveled northeastward the next two days through eastern Tennessee, the Smokies, and the Carolinas. A Knoxville News Sentinel nature column writer told of many bluebirders in that part of the state reporting boxes with bluebirds that did not survive. The Birmingham Audubon Society's annual spring count covering three counties – Jefferson, Shelby, and St. Clair had its lowest bluebird count in years.

The loss of bluebirds was dramatically evident on my trail this year. Fully, one-third of approximately 180 boxes was empty, approximately one-third was taken over by the hardier, more opportunistic Carolina Chickadee (by comparison only ten boxes were so occupied in 1992), and the remaining one-third had active bluebird nests. At this writing, the birds are raising their second broods and seem to be doing better. However, it is obvious that my almost continuous upward production rate of bluebirds to over 6000 birds fledged will be slowed considerably this year.

Man and predators can be blamed for most of the estimated 90% decline in Eastern Bluebirds in my lifetime. But in this sad situation, the cause must be attributed to the unusual weather. However, the successful restoration of the Eastern Bluebird will continue as we all help bring back the bluebird by properly placing, maintaining and monitoring nest boxes.

As noted biologist and field guide author, Chandler Robbins, once said, "The average citizen can not do much to save the Bald Eagle, the Whooping Crane, or the Loggerhead Shrike, but each and everyone of us can help save the Bluebird." **John Findlay, III**, 2749 Millbrook Road, Birmingham, AL 35243.