

# *Sialia*

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The North American  
Bluebird Society



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**Sialia** means bluebirds. Hence the title of this journal. Technically, **sialia** is the Latinized, neuter plural version of the Greek word **sialis**, a noun meaning a "kind of bird." Since the Eastern Bluebird was the first bluebird classified by Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), he gave it the species name **sialis**, though he placed it in the genus **Motacilla** which is now reserved for the wagtails. It was William Swainson (1789-1855), who, in 1827, decided that the bluebirds needed a genus of their own within the thrush family (Turdidae). He selected the generic name **Sialia** which he simply adapted from the species name **sialis** which Linnaeus had used. Therefore, the scientific name for the Eastern Bluebird is **Sialia sialis** (pronounced see-ah!-ee-ah see'-ahl-iss). Similarly, the Western Bluebird and Mountain Bluebird, the two other species within the genus, were named **Sialia mexicana** and **Sialia currucoides** (coo-roo-coy-dees) respectively. Their species names are descriptive of their locations. All three bluebird species are native only to the North American continent, although each inhabits different regions generally separated by the Rocky Mountains and by altitudinal preferences.

While the adult birds all show differing plumages, the young of all three species look remarkably alike, prominently displaying spotted breasts and large white eye rings. This similarity in plumage was the principal reason the Society chose the juvenile bluebird for its logo. Since bluebirds almost always choose to raise their young in small enclosed cavities, a young bluebird sitting near a nesting box seemed to symbolize our mission. The hope of any species resides in its young. Because of bluebird nesting preferences, the survival of their young may depend on the nesting box, especially since natural cavities, for a variety of reasons, are disappearing rapidly. The theme of bluebird young nurtured in man-made structures will be a recurring one in our art and literature. We hope that this theme will remind all about the plight of the bluebird, and will stimulate action which will allow this beautiful creature to prosper.

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# Sialia

The Quarterly Journal  
About Bluebirds

Volume 3, Number 4  
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The Carolina Chickadee by  
Suzanne Pennell Turner was just  
one of the species that nested on  
Goddard's Cavity Nester Trail.

**SIALIA** welcomes the submission of articles, artwork and photographs for publication. Although this journal is dedicated primarily to the bluebird, material relating to native cavity nesting species will also be considered. Manuscripts should be neatly typed and double spaced. All material submitted for publication is subject to editing or rewriting. Include a duplicate copy if you wish to proof the manuscript before publication. All manuscripts will be acknowledged. Black and white glossy photographs or negatives are preferred. Print the subject, names of any individuals pictured, photographer and return address on back of each photograph. Before preparing tables, graphs or other display material, please check with the editor about the requirements of our reproduction process. Art is welcome and should be in black pen-and-ink. The editor's address is 10617 Graeoch Road, Laurel, Maryland 20707



# Presidential Points

George N. Grant

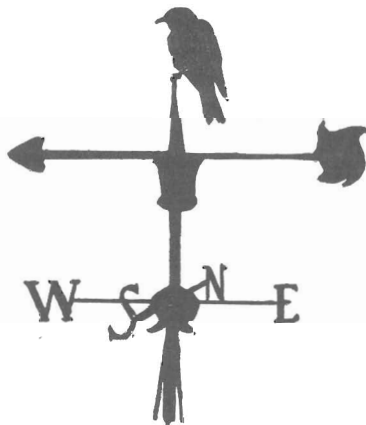
I would like to use my final column to explore briefly two important aspects of the bluebird trail.

The first item is swallow-bluebird competition. For the past two years I have maintained nearly 200 paired nesting boxes ranging in distance from those placed back to back on the same post to others located as far as 75 feet apart.

I found results very encouraging, but, unfortunately, extensive business travel prevented my gathering the necessary supporting data. From my personal observation and experience, there is no doubt in my mind that pairing boxes is highly effective in discouraging swallows (in my part of the country Tree Swallows) from taking over all nesting boxes.

I may have observed one or two instances in which Tree Swallows nested closer than 20 feet and maybe a half dozen cases in which only 50 or 60 feet separated nests. Most of those instances occurred late in the season when the territorial instinct was not as strong and one of the paired boxes was well along in the nesting cycle; therefore, I would suggest placing paired boxes no more than 8 to 15 feet apart.

The second problem that needs further investigation is the number of cases in which nestlings are found dead in the nest for no apparent reason. Many people think that the parent birds simply abandon the young or are unable to obtain sufficient food for them. In most cases I don't think either of those reasons is



the major answer. The explanation given to me by Larry Zeleny makes the most sense. Observations for the past three years on my own trail support it as valid.

Larry pointed out that, in most cases, the young that are found dead are between 8 and 12 days old. Such deaths usually occur during periods of cold and/or wet weather. It appears that, in the majority of cases, younger and older nestlings tend to survive to a much greater degree. The reason for the survival of the younger nestlings is that they are brooded by the female to keep them warm while the older nestlings are sufficiently feathered to maintain their own body heat. Those nestlings which are in the critical 8 to 12 day age bracket are neither sufficiently feathered to maintain the required body temperature, nor are they still being brooded. On cold mornings those birds are too chilled to respond to food, so the parents, unable to cope with the unresponsiveness of the nestlings, abandon them.

I have definitely observed this pattern on my trail and believe it takes a large toll in the Northern States. We'd like to hear from other bluebirders on this subject. ■



# The Eastern Bluebird in the Highlands of Southeastern New York State

Robert Speiser and John Benzinger

The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) in New York State is usually thought of as being more prevalent in the "upstate" area, *i.e.*, north of Albany. South of the Catskill Mountains, bluebirds rapidly dwindle in number especially as one approaches the New York City area. Although a few pairs of bluebirds are expected to breed in the Highlands each season, new evidence uncovered through vigorous field work demonstrates that this species is not as rare in the area as formerly supposed.

## Study Area

The authors' survey encompassed the Hudson Highlands west of the Hudson River and a small part of the Ramapo Mountains in northern New Jersey, for a total of some 660 square kilometers. This study area is situated approximately 50 kilometers north-northwest of Manhattan. The Highlands are basically an area of low, rugged, rolling hills with occasional plateau-like sections and some wide but relatively deep valleys. State and township parklands, and private forestland make up the bulk of the Highlands. Urbanization and forest disruption is slight to moderate and restricted mostly to the valley areas. However, the lowlands flanking the Highlands are moderately to heavily urbanized.

Forest vegetation consists primarily of various species of oak (*Quercus*) species which dominate the ridgetops and upper slopes, while northern hardwoods such as American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) and Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*) dominate the richer soils of valleys and plateau areas. Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) is a dominant species in swamps or other areas which are wet throughout most of the year.

## Methods

Our survey was conducted between early May and early August 1980 with the majority of the field work accomplished between 0500-1400 EST from late May to late July. Field models consisted of checking on foot known or possible bluebird habitats. A few of these were checked twice or more. United States Geological Survey and regional maps designed for hikers were often useful, especially in locating swamps and cleared areas. Thirteen bluebird nesting boxes placed in likely habitats by the authors the preceding season were also checked. Battery operated cassette tape players with seven centimeter speakers were used by each author. We worked alone and together approximately equal amounts of time, playing bluebird songs at the speculated and known habitats and then observing and listening for a reasonable amount of time for a responding bluebird. Usually 10-15 minutes (depending on habitat size) was spent at each suspected habitat before moving on to another. If a bluebird was discovered, we moved a significant distance (at least 400-500 meters) away before commencing to play the tape recorder again. Caution was used in

order to avoid double counting individuals; rechecking by backtracking was sometimes necessary. Our main purpose was to document the number of territorial males, but we also noted females and juveniles whenever they were encountered.

## Results

Sixty-six male bluebirds were observed on territory and at least 25 of these were paired to females. The total number of individuals (males, females and immatures) equaled 155. This breaks down to one territorial adult male per 10 square km. It must be emphasized that these are minimum totals. At least a dozen more areas of "probable" bluebird occurrence were not inspected due to the large size of the survey area and private landholdings within it. Also, it must be expected that a few individuals were missed in some of the habitats which were inspected.

A large majority of the observed bluebirds occurred in the Harriman-Bear Mountain State Park. Only one adult male was located in the Ramapo Mountain section. The Sterling Forest section, annually a major bluebird breeding ground, contained only one adult male.

While a few males reacted rather passively to our tape recorded songs, the usual result was immediate and positive, followed by a close inspection and approach. The aroused male would fly back and forth below the treetops uttering the song and occasionally fluffing up his plumage. Vigorous branch pecking, indicative of redirected aggression, was often observed. This behavior left no doubt that such a male was indeed "on territory." Males had no trouble discerning our songs (at full volume) from a distance of at least 125 m. Juveniles, but seldom adult females, were attracted readily to the tape recorded songs.

Adult males were found in almost equal numbers in two main habitat types—swamps and recent fire-burned areas, both quite different ecologically. The former is somewhat cool, moist,

and humid; the latter is relatively hot and dry. The swamp habitats are primarily the result of Beaver dams, man-made impoundments and roads, or natural occurrences. Fire-burned areas are almost always located on mountaintops and upper slopes and result from careless campers. Virtually all bluebird habitats were characterized by a large percentage of dead, standing wood. Also important are available nesting cavities and an open forest floor or adjacent grassy clearing to allow foraging.

Other avians commonly sharing the swamp habitats with bluebirds were the Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*), Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), and Tree Swallow (*Iridoprocne bicolor*). In fire-burned areas, the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), Common Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), and Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*) often occurred.

## Discussion

Such a relatively large number of breeding bluebirds has not been known to occur in the Hudson Highlands since at least the early part of this century. The history of the bluebird here has been sketchy. Mearns (1878) noted the bluebird to be an "abundant summer resident"; however, Carr (1940), approximately a half-century later, considered it to be "uncommon." Furthermore, he stated that there were "three nest sites in the (Harriman-Bear Mountain) Park." Such a low total suggests Carr may have been in error. The local bluebird population remained at a fair level, at least in the lowland surrounding the Highlands, until the late 1950's according to Bull (1964). The over-use of insecticides and rampant land and housing development, along with their concomitant European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) populations, finally caught up with the bluebirds at the beginning of the 1960's, according to Deed (1968), who described its status as "rare and local." However, he was more properly referring to the

bluebird's status in lowland Rockland County, NY, just east of and adjacent to the Highlands. In the 1970's, reported observations of breeding bluebirds in the Highlands were scarce and a later account by Deed (1976) mentioned no positive change in the bluebird's status.

The results of the 1980 survey show that the bluebird's status is more properly "very uncommon" or "uncommon" (at least one individual per day in favorable habitat per locality). Furthermore, we have no reason to believe that the Highlands' bluebird population has been significantly different from the 1980 level for the past few seasons and possibly the last decade. This finding strongly suggests that field observations made by "sport birders" cannot be relied upon to reflect the true status of a widely dispersed and relatively passive, soft-singing bird, such as the bluebird.

The observation of only one male bluebird in the Sterling Forest area, previously mentioned as a main habitat area, warrants further discussion. Such a scarcity of bluebirds here was completely unexpected, since this area contains superb bluebird habitat. Yet, at the Harriman-Bear Mountain State Park, just a few kilometers to the east, bluebirds were found in virtually every habitat available to them.

Only one major difference between these two ecologically almost identical areas was apparent. The 1980 late spring and summer seasons in the Highlands was marked by a tremendous outbreak of Gypsy Moth (*Porthetria dispar*) larvae, but this outbreak was not uniform in extent and effect. The Sterling Forest area was severely affected with thousands of hectares of forest totally or partially defoliated by teeming millions of hungry "caterpillars." With the canopy layers gone, along with much of the understory, air and ground temperatures in the forest soared. Indeed, the authors conducted their field work there with much difficulty, as virtually no shade existed. The Harriman-Bear Mountain State Park, however, experienced only a small outbreak and

heavy defoliation was confined to only a few small areas.

The authors speculate that the Sterling Forest bluebird population dispersed to other places where habitat was less affected, thus abandoning their territories. The nearby Harriman-Bear Mountain State Park, with its lush forests still intact, served as the major refuge—which accounts for the abnormally high bluebird count in that area. During the height of the defoliation (mid-June), young produced from the first clutch would have been old enough to care for themselves; thus, they would not be instrumental in bonding adults to their territory. Furthermore, very few second clutches would have been initiated at that particular time.

Dispersal of the Sterling Forest bluebirds was probably prompted by the lack of any shade; possibly, they suffered some other secondary effect such as the dispersal or loss of a favored insect prey or may have even been influenced through some negative psychological factor. No other explanation can account for such gross differences in the number of bluebirds between these two areas of the Highlands. Unfortunately, the Sterling Forest area was not surveyed in late March and early April when bluebirds would have been on territory initially. But we can hardly conceive how they would not have been there during that time. At least the one male found in Sterling Forest in May, before the defoliation was advanced, could not be located in a recheck during the height of the defoliation.

The authors know of no other published information concerning forest defoliation effects on the dispersal of the bluebird or any other avian species. Not surprisingly, in many areas of total defoliation we noted a general scarcity of avian species. The negative effects of *Porthetria* forest defoliation on various avians, particularly their reproductive success, is a subject which merits further study.

Ecologically, the Highlands' bluebird population has come full circle.



Before the arrival of the colonists, the only habitats available to bluebirds must have been the various Beaver swamps and old meadows, patches of forest killed by insects and disease, areas of oak mortality caused by drought, and areas disturbed by fire, either naturally occurring or deliberately set during the slash-and-burn clearing methods of native Americans. After colonists settled the area, great tracts of Highlands forest were cleared and burned, in an attempt to imitate the flourishing agricultural community in the surrounding lowlands. Gradually, the bluebird adapted to new and more available habitat among the lowlands, nesting in fenceposts and other suitable structures throughout the rural countryside. Meanwhile, the Beaver (*Castor canadensis*), along with several other animal species, was being extirpated from the area.

With the introduction of the European Starling and House Sparrow, coupled with an increasing human population, bluebird numbers gradually diminished among the lowlands. Fortunately, soon after the turn of the twentieth century, a great portion of the Highlands was secured as either state parkland or as private forest preserves. Shortly thereafter Beaver were introduced and their swamps once again began to appear. As the momentum of land development and housing reached a peak, an agricultural mode of life (along with the bluebird) gave way to a suburban-urban existence.

However, a small "relict" population of bluebirds continued to find refuge among the still undeveloped, relatively "wild" Highlands. The state parkland particularly, while protecting wildlife, also attracted many recreationists and campers to the Highlands. Many of the not very knowledgeable campers found their campfires going out of control burning and destroying portions of the monotonous forest. The bluebird, as a result, profited immensely as many more nesting habitats were made available. This is further proof that the eco-

logical effects of fires are not all adverse.

The deep woods of the Highlands serve as a buffer from the high numbers of European Starlings, House Sparrows, housecats, and people in the surrounding lowlands and developed montane valleys. The sprawling forest, with its occasional openings, is the entire reason why bluebirds persist here in some number. Zeleny (1976), Pinkowski (1979), and others reported similar occurrences for other areas of the Eastern United States. In the near future, the bluebird should continue to do well in the Highlands, providing land development is wisely controlled. Ecological forest succession is not a serious threat to bluebird habitats upon the mountain summits and upper slopes, since successional processes in those areas are comparatively slow.

## Summary

New evidence shows that the Eastern Bluebird is not rare in the Hudson Highlands and that a fair number exist there, previously overlooked, almost on the doorstep of New York City. Their existence there is made possible by a sprawling forest which provides the necessary isolation from European Starlings and House Sparrows. Interspersed throughout the Highlands forest are swamps and burned-over areas which provide nesting habitat which meet the bluebird's specific needs. Available evidence points to the dispersal of bluebirds from areas completely defoliated by Gypsy Moth (*Porthetria*) larvae. The greatest danger facing the bluebird in the Highlands is unrestricted land development. ■

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# GODDARD'S CAVITY NESTER TRAIL

Delos C. Dupree

What started out as a "Bluebird Trail" 14 years ago at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, has evolved gradually into a "Cavity Nester Trail." There were few, if any, bluebirds at Goddard when the first nesting boxes were erected in 1967. Slowly, Dr. Zeleny's bluebird offspring from the adjacent United States Department of Agriculture grounds moved into the newly installed boxes. Within five years as many as 60 young bluebirds were fledged during the nesting season. Changes started to occur shortly after 1969 when a five year land management program was implemented which reduced the lawn from 400 to 100 acres.

House Wrens began using the boxes as vegetative succession changed the habitat from lawn to shrub. Bluebirds were no match for the aggressive wrens. When bluebirds ventured into wren territory, the short-tailed fighters pecked holes in the eggs. To add insult to injury, a pair of wrens was seldom satisfied with just one nest. They built two and sometimes three, even though, of course, they needed only one for nesting.

Carolina Chickadees commenced using the boxes when trees invaded the shrub areas adjacent to the woods. Since chickadees and bluebirds were both early nesters, they sometimes took turns building their own nests on top of their competitor's nests. It

was generally a toss-up as to who finally won. Apparently, the female chickadees remained on the nest more than did the female bluebirds, because the wrens didn't seem to bother them too much. Maybe, on the other hand, the hissing noise the chickadees made when disturbed, scared the wrens away.

Tufted Titmice realized, about three years ago, that bluebird nest boxes made an excellent place for rearing a family. By then, trees adjacent to areas near the boxes had attained a height of about 15 feet. Female titmice, like the female chickadees, stayed on the nest and didn't seem to be disturbed by the wrens. In addition to hissing like chickadees, titmice tapped on the inside of the box with their bills to intimidate intruders.

Carolina Wrens didn't start using nest boxes until this year, but they were successful in raising one brood of five young. They didn't appear to be as pugnacious as the other wrens, having selected a box next to bluebirds without disturbing them. Their nest resembled a chickadee nest with a canopy. Only one nest was built.

This year I was amazed and delighted when 19 of the first 20 boxes that I monitored in the spring were occupied. Forty-one of the 62 boxes on the entire trail were used for first broods. Last year a total of 85 young of all

species were fledged during the nesting season. Currently, with the nesting season not yet over, 217 young of all species have fledged, with bluebirds showing signs of making a comeback.

What caused the population explosion? During the past year approximately 400 acres of wooded land near the Space Center was cleared for shopping centers, office buildings and homes. The only logical explanation for the influx of chickadees and titmice would be that, having been deprived of natural nesting cavities, the nest boxes at Goddard fulfilled a basic need.

With more and more land being cleared and with the added pressure of snags being removed for firewood, the odds do not favor cavity nesting species. Of the 85 cavity nesters, two—the Ivory-billed and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, are on the endangered species list. Some species, for example, the Peregrine Falcon and the Hawk Owl, have adapted to other types of nesting sites, such as cliffs or caves. Who knows how many Purple Martins, Tree Swallows and Wood Ducks, to name a few, would be around today if they had not been aided by the efforts of interested conservationists. It is increasingly obvious that native cavity nesting bird species need human help to survive.

There are several things you can do to aid in native cavity nester conservation. Monitoring your nest boxes on a regular basis is probably the most important. You wouldn't want to be responsible for establishing a House Sparrow trail. European Starlings and House Sparrows are not protected by law, so use your own judgment as to what to do with their

nests, eggs and young. It is important to remove used nests of any species as soon as possible after the young have fledged, especially early in the season. This gives the bluebirds a chance to nest again and gives other birds a chance for a successful first nesting.

A specified number of snags per acre must be left standing on federally controlled lands, but few state or county governments have such requirements. Perhaps there is something you can do to remedy this situation and help to preserve natural cavities for native nesting birds. Certainly, you can try to influence your neighbors and friends to leave snags standing and to think twice before cutting those on your own property.

Each year new and exciting things occur on the "Cavity Nester Trail" which makes monitoring the trail a tremendous learning experience. Several years ago I saw three bluebird families being raised in three cavities located in the same tree. This raised the question, "Why do nesting boxes have to be a hundred yards apart?" I sought the answer by placing boxes one hundred feet apart. I still don't know the answer because bluebirds were never particularly plentiful, but this year something quite unexpected happened. In six boxes placed 100 feet apart in an open area, three had Tufted Titmouse nests, two had Carolina Chickadee nests, and the last one had a bluebird nest, although the same species did not nest in adjacent boxes. Most bluebirders have heard the mating song of the bluebird and have seen the mating ritual, but how many have seen

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# Twentieth Annual Nestbox Report from Brandon, Manitoba—1980

The following table was compiled for the 1980 nesting season for that portion of the Canadian trail system monitored by the "Friends of the Bluebirds."



Occupant	No. of Nestings
Mountain Bluebird .....	694
Eastern Bluebird .....	41
Bluebirds (not identified as to species) .....	6
Tree Swallow .....	506
House Sparrow .....	111
House Wren .....	40
European Starling .....	2
Black-capped Chickadee .....	2
Mouse .....	9
Squirrel .....	2

Among the interesting items noted in the report were the following: Barbara Robinson, Camp Hughes and South Shilo lines, reported 2 successful hatchings of white eggs in the same box of Mountain Bluebirds. The first clutch contained 5 eggs and the second 4. Mr. and Mrs. Perry Hopkins of the Hartney area reported 6 Mountain Bluebirds hatched from white eggs in box #610. Betty Shankland, monitoring the South Griswold line, had 5 Mountain Bluebirds hatch from white eggs in box #4181. Hugh Munro reported 2 successful hatchings of Mountain Bluebirds from white eggs: 5 in box #800 and 5 in box #4344A on old highway #1 to Carberry.

Peter Sawatzky of the Carberry-Glenboro line reported two unusual incidents. On May 29 in box #612 he found 3 dead young Mountain Bluebirds and 3 eggs. There had been no nest built. The eggs had been laid on the bare wood of the box floor. On

the same date box #929 contained 6 Mountain Bluebird young. He noted that one young bird had a deformed bill like that of a crossbill. "The bird seemed quite healthy, but smaller than the other young in the nest."

Mr. and Mrs. Jim Spear reported 152 nestings of Mountain Bluebirds in their Russell, Shellmouth, Churchbridge area. A small flock was so tame that they flew to Mrs. Spear and perched on her hand.

This report was possible because volunteers from almost two dozen communities monitored the nestlines and submitted data. The results were compiled by Norah Lane, Mamie McCowan, Barbara Robinson, Hazel Patmore, and Betty Shankland. ■

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# How Bluebirds React to Infertile Eggs

Lawrence Zeleny

The eggs of wild birds are usually but not always fertile. In the case of bluebirds it is quite common for one or more of the eggs of a clutch to fail to hatch. If such an egg is then broken open and there is no visible sign of a partially developed embryo it can reasonably be assumed that the egg was infertile. Occasionally a partially developed embryo is found, in which case the egg had been fertile, but the embryo died during incubation because of some inherent weakness or, perhaps, because the egg had been exposed to excessive heat or cold.

Infertility is usually a natural phenomenon caused by some functional or organic defect in the reproductive organs of one of the parent birds. But sometimes it may be due to the ingestion by the parent birds of some harmful chemical. Various pesticides have been shown to reduce fertility in a number of bird species.

Experienced bluebird trail operators regularly encounter infertile eggs. The percentage of eggs that prove to be infertile seems to vary from year to year on any trail, perhaps due to differences in weather and food supply or even in the deleterious chemicals encountered. In my own experience about 10 to 15 percent of bluebird eggs prove to be infertile.

Some interesting observations have been made on the behavior of bluebirds when their eggs are infertile. Eggs that fail to hatch are sometimes carried away and

discarded by the birds shortly after the viable eggs have hatched. More commonly, however, the unhatched eggs are simply left in the nest and remain there after the young birds have flown.

Occasionally all of the eggs in a clutch are infertile, and it is interesting to note the wide variations in how the bluebirds react to this unfortunate circumstance. The female will usually give up trying to hatch such a clutch after having brooded the eggs for periods less than the normal 13 or 14 day incubation period. She will then bring in more nesting material and completely cover all of the eggs, virtually building a new nest on top of the old one. Then she will lay another clutch of eggs which will, it is hoped, be fertile so that she can raise her brood. On one occasion that I observed, this procedure was repeated and no fertile eggs were laid until the third clutch.

How can the female bluebird know that her eggs are infertile before she has brooded them for the full incubation period? One can only guess the answer. Perhaps when she is brooding viable eggs, she is able to feel the movements of the developing embryos in much the same manner that a human mother can feel the movements of her unborn baby. Failing to feel any such movements, the mother bird may conclude instinctively that the eggs will never hatch and that it would be a foolish waste of time to continue brooding. But sometimes this decision to stop

brooding is made as early as the fourth or fifth day of incubation, in which case it is hard to believe that the bird could feel any movement in the embryo. Perhaps under these circumstances birds have a "sixth sense" the nature of which is completely beyond human comprehension. No one knows the answer for sure, but we do know that some of the birds' senses are far superior to ours.

Not all female bluebirds are capable of detecting infertile eggs, or, if they are, they react differently. A few birds will continue to brood complete clutches of infertile eggs for the full 14 day incubation period or even longer. A pair of bluebirds that I observed quite closely during the summer of 1976 experienced a long and pathetic nesting season. The sequence of events was so unusual that it seems worth recording.

Two nesting boxes, one a standard type and the other an experimental model, were mounted 16 feet apart on fence posts. The bluebirds chose first the standard box and built their nest in April. A clutch of 3 eggs was incubated less than a week when the female evidently decided they were infertile and started to build a new nest over them. But she promptly changed her mind and moved to the nearby experimental box where she built another nest and laid 4 eggs which she brooded faithfully for 28 days, twice the normal incubation period, before deciding they would not hatch. Then she returned to the standard nesting box, which had, in the meantime, been cleaned out, and built still another nest. After depositing one egg in this latest nest she evidently became confused and returned to her previous nest which still contained the 4 infertile eggs. Not bothering

to cover these eggs she laid 3 more eggs in that nest. The nest then contained 7 eggs, 4 of the previous clutch and 3 of the latest clutch.

It would seem that the ill-fated bird was proud of her large set of 7 eggs and that she was determined to produce a brood from them at all costs. For, believe it or not, she sat on them for 84 days and nights in a patient but futile effort to bring forth baby birds. The original 4 of the 7 eggs, of course, had then been brooded for 112 days.

During all this time the male bird remained faithful and unusually protective of his mate and her nest. Each time I visited the nest he was close by and attacked me with such daring that I was often forced to shield my eyes to protect them from possible injury. My last visit before the nest was finally abandoned was on September 19. This time the spirit of both birds appeared to be broken. They sat dejectedly nearby on the fence, looking haggard and worn, and scolded me in only a perfunctory manner. But the eggs were still warm. Six days later the birds were gone and the eggs were cold. This female bluebird should receive a medal of some kind. She had spent five months trying her best to raise a family during which time she built 3 complete nests, laid 11 eggs, and sat brooding eggs for approximately 117 days—all to no avail. Perhaps she deserves a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records!* ■

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**Editor's Note:** For more than a decade Dr. Zeleny contributed a regular column to the *Nature Society News*. The editor has kindly given us permission to reprint this material in *Sialia*. The above article first appeared in the October 27, 1976 issue.



# Review of Recent Literature on Bluebirds

Theodore W. Gutzke and Ben Pinkowski

Munro, H. L., D. H. Munro, and R. C. Rounds. 1981. Fertility of albinistic eggs of Mountain Bluebirds. *Auk* 98: 181-182.—Hatching success of 789 normally pigmented (blue) eggs in southern Manitoba was 91.2% compared with 95.5% for 22 pale blue eggs and 96.1% for 26 white eggs. All clutches contained either completely normal or completely abnormal eggs, supporting the belief that albinism is a trait of individual females.

Pitts, T. D. 1978. Eastern Bluebird mortality at winter roosts in Tennessee. *Bird-Banding* 49:77-78.—Observations in Obion and Weakley Counties, Tennessee during the exceptionally cold winters of 1961 and 1977 documented bluebird mortality. During March 1961 seven birds were found dead in nest boxes and 19 were discovered in January 1977. Four birds were found in one box and 10 in another. Death was attributed to a food shortage due to snow and ice covering fruits and berries during periods of severe cold. All birds were emaciated with no fat reserves. Weights ranged from 19.5 to 25.9 g (normal is about 30 g). The breeding population in Obion County decreased from 25 pairs in 1976 to 14 pairs in 1977.

Power, H. W. 1980. Male escorting and protecting females at the nest cavity in Mountain Bluebirds. *Wilson Bulletin* 92:509-511.—Mountain Bluebirds were studied at 17 nest locations over a nine-year period using closed circuit television and observation blinds. Male bluebirds escorted females to and from the nest 81% of the time. Often the male encouraged his mate to enter the nest by displays and by entering first. These behaviors may have evolved to protect the female from other male bluebirds and ambush from predators, while reducing hesitancy to nesting duties. Es-

corting and protecting the female increases the likelihood of reproductive success by the male.

Tomlinson, W. H., Jr. and F. L. Haines. II. 1980. Use of bluebird nest boxes in coastal South Carolina. *Chat* 44:70-75.—Seventeen nest boxes were placed in recently clearcut and burned areas within an actively managed forest of Horry County, South Carolina. Eleven boxes were occupied by Eastern Bluebirds, six boxes produced double clutches, and an estimated 68 birds fledged. A distance of 528 feet between nest boxes resulted in intraspecific conflicts. Predation by Black Bears (*Ursus americanus*) was observed at nine boxes. The nest box design is included.

Woodward, P. W. and J. C. Woodward. 1979. Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism on Eastern Bluebirds. *Wilson Bulletin* 91:321-322.—Six of 27 (16.2%) bluebird nests with completed clutches near Reston, Virginia, were parasitized by cowbirds. One cowbird was raised to independence and another female bluebird was observed feeding a fledgling cowbird. Boxes used for the nestings were made from cardboard, half-gallon cartons and had large entrance holes (avg. = 2 1/8 inches), which together with a low density of other potential hosts may have contributed to the high incidence of parasitism. ■

Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, R.D. #1, Box 148, Basking Ridge, New Jersey 07920 (Gutzke); Fort Berthold College Center, P.O. Box 308, New Town, North Dakota 58763 (Pinkowski).

Persons having recent articles on bluebirds for review (other than those published in *Sialia*) or desiring to review articles are asked to contact Ben Pinkowski, Chairman, NABS Research Committee (address above).

# Protecting Nesting Boxes From Climbing Predators

Robert M. Patterson

In some parts of North America the loss of eggs, nestlings or adult bluebirds to nest predators can be a serious matter. Climbing predators such as raccoons, snakes and squirrels sometimes take a heavy toll on bluebird nesting box trails. At the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Prince George's County, Maryland, climbing predators, especially the Black Rat Snake (*Elaphe obsoleta*), have seriously affected research on birds using nesting boxes.

## Automobile Grease, Red Pepper and Moth Crystals Have Drawbacks

Several methods have been recommended to deal with predator problems. Dr. Lawrence Zeleny (*The Bluebird*, 1976, Indiana University Press) especially recommends the application of soft automotive grease as a coating on metal posts used to support nesting boxes. This method is quite effective against raccoon predation, but it is not totally successful in the case of snakes. Grease dries out rather quickly if applied to wooden posts, and it may become quite stiff when nighttime or early morning temperatures drop to near-freezing. The rat snake is a powerful constrictor that can often climb through the grease, leaving grease marks on a nesting box as a sign of its visit.

Bluebird trail operators at the National Zoological Park Research Center in the Virginia Piedmont found that adding a sprinkling of red pepper to the automotive grease helped to ward off snakes, but, again, without total success (Dr. Eugene Morton, pers. comm.). The pepper served as a skin irritant. A liberal dose of creosote on posts supporting nesting boxes has been tried by some trail operators with mixed success. At Patuxent W.R.C. snakes have climbed creosoted power poles to prey on bluebirds nesting in boxes. The effect of creosote vapors on bluebirds is unknown, although they are considered a human health risk.

Another practice that has been recommended is the sprinkling of moth crystals (paradichlorobenzene) on the ground around the nesting box to mask the human scent left when trail monitors visit the boxes, a sign that may lead predators to investigate and feast on the contents of the box. Research by Jonathan Bart (Impact of human visitations on avian nesting success. *Living Bird*, 1977, Cornell Univ. 16: 187-192) using nest record cards filed at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology suggests that predation on bluebird nests visited by humans may be as much as 10 times greater than at nests that are not visited. Clearly, it is in the interest of bluebird conservation to take measures to protect these birds on nesting box trails, particularly if the boxes are being visited to monitor nesting success and if the boxes are in areas where predation is likely to occur.

Predation by snakes is most likely in grassland or pasture areas where a healthy population of field mice or moles exists (their principal prey) and near woodlots containing fallen trees that serve as snake denning sites. Black snakes are particularly abundant in my area in moist bottomland woodlands and along hedgerows and ponds in agricultural areas where they may be found in dense vegetation. Raccoons can be a problem almost anywhere, but they seem to be most common around farms where corn is grown, especially

late in the growing period when they prey on late-nesting bluebirds in boxes near the perimeter of corn fields at the same time that they feed on ripened corn. Raccoons may also be an increasing problem in rural or suburban areas where their numbers have increased as a result of the increasing food supply found by raiding unprotected garbage cans at human residences.

### **Aluminum Downspout and Plastic Pipe Offer Superior Protection**

To protect against predators at research nesting boxes, personnel at the Patuxent W.R.C. have found one method that has been proven to be extremely successful. Loss of eggs, young or adults to climbing predators has been reduced to zero according to project managers (pers. comm.). The product that produces this protection is standard baked enamel aluminum downspout approximately 2 x 4 inches in size. The downspout is available in 10 foot lengths at most lumber yards and, when cut in half, each length is sufficient to protect a nesting box. However, even with 5 feet of vertical protection, it may be necessary to prevent the growth of tall weeds or small shrubs around the base of mounting poles.

After a mounting pole is planted in the ground, the length of downspout is simply slipped over it and the nesting box is then mounted. It is extremely important that one or two additional steps be taken to prevent snakes from climbing up between the mounting pole and spouting: 1.) set the downspout about 3 inches into the soil at the base of the pole, and/or 2.) snip the downspout at the corners at either or both ends and bend the resulting tabs toward the mounting pole until the open end of the spouting is totally closed. Downspouting does not have to be greased or receive any other form of maintenance.

Another product that offers excellent protection against climbing predators is 4 inch diameter, smooth-finished PVC or plastic drain pipe. This

product is commonly available in 10 or 20 foot lengths and can be cut easily to 5 foot lengths. Both PVC pipe and aluminum downspout can be cut with a standard hacksaw. Since PVC pipe is too rigid to be cut and folded, it is necessary to plant the pipe several inches into the soil at the base of mounting posts. Actually, PVC pipe makes an excellent mounting post by itself. A 10 foot section, when sunk about 2 feet into the ground, can have the nesting box mounted directly to it at any height using nuts and bolts, wire, or pipe clamps. The top of the pipe at 8 feet above ground level makes a very nice hunting perch for the bluebirds. PVC pipe is easily drilled using a standard electric drill and bit.

At a discount lumber yard in my area, 10 foot lengths of aluminum downspout cost \$4.49 while 10 foot lengths of 4 inch diameter PVC smooth-finished pipe are \$3.84. Thus 5 foot "protectors" for nesting box mounting poles cost between \$1.95-\$2.25 per box. Since neither product rusts, rots, or otherwise deteriorates, each offers lifetime durability without need for paint or other maintenance.



Photograph by Robert P. Solem

**Adult Black Rat Snake**

Recently, I had the experience of opening a nesting box that should have contained four young bluebirds just about old enough to fledge. Previously I had banded the nestlings, but they were too young at that time for me to determine their sex. On this later visit I found a Black Rat Snake about 4½ feet long coiled inside the box. There were no young to be seen, nor were there any adults in the area. Although

I could not see any large lumps indicating the snake had recently had a meal, there didn't seem to be any other reason for it to have been in the box. I wanted to determine if the snake had consumed any of the young in order to ensure the accuracy of my trail records and to avoid reporting band numbers to the Bird Banding Laboratory of birds which were already dead. I sacrificed and dissected the snake and found three of the young bluebirds within it. Apparently one of the nestlings had managed to escape or had already fledged before the snake

entered the nesting box. I recovered the three bird bands and awarded them to other young bluebirds.

As a result of my snake-bluebird experience, and what I have learned about the ease of protecting nesting boxes from climbing predators, I have made my first New Year's resolution for 1982. All nesting boxes under my care in predator-prone areas will be protected fully next year. ■

12601 Buckingham Drive  
Bowie, MD 20715

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## BLUEBIRDS ON THE HILL

Mary O'Mara Putschi

World weary, I walk up the grassy slope of my backyard—a clearing edged with woods, to visit a tiny house built with my own hands. Attached to a pole five feet from the ground, it stands near an eight foot Austrian Pine. A few feet away I pause and think how sad the empty birdhouse looks, and wonder what went wrong.

Just a couple of days after installing the box, I had thrilled to see a dazzling, blue-winged, rusty-breasted bluebird fluttering about, moving gracefully in and out of the inch-and-a-half opening, showing off his find to his lady friends with all the nervous excitement of a suitor.

In between busy nest-building trips and cavalier courtship, I'd see him darting from a branch, or from the roof of my study, dropping to the ground to snap up an insect with the adroitness of a gull diving for a fish, then lift off

across the hill, gashing the air electric blue.

Mornings I'd wake to his soft, warbling song, convinced that he was greeting me, and immediately I'd reach for the binoculars so I would not miss his enchanting form stationed like a marine in dress blues atop the pine tree.

Evenings he'd perch on a nearby branch or on the roof of his house, taking the air, and I'd wonder why he hadn't persuaded a female to share his nest.

When, three weeks later, the nest was still unoccupied, I worried that something was wrong with the box—or with him. Perhaps he was fated to bachelorhood.

Then the construction crew came bringing their grinding, pounding noises and loud voices. Fretting that my bluebird would seek a quieter home, I silently

cursed the unknowing workers on the hill.

For two days now I've not seen or heard him. I feel bereft as I stand before the little house. After knocking gently, I wait a few seconds. Perhaps another bird, a wren or a swallow, has taken over the box.

"Anybody home?" I ask before carefully pushing open the panel.

What joy! Perched atop a nest of loose grass sits a brooding bluebird. I feel as if I had entered the realm of the sacred and had been given a precious gift. And I *know* that it isn't just luck or convenience that brings her to my backyard—it's destiny.

Quietly I close the panel, and aware of a brilliant patch of blue adorning a nearby tree, I float down the hill.

Now it is dusk and my bluebird in all his royal splendor stands guard at the edge of the little house. My heart is singing: I'm to have a bluebird family.

To be the recipient of such a gift, I must be worthy. So I'll be-

come a lover of birds, a searcher of the skies.

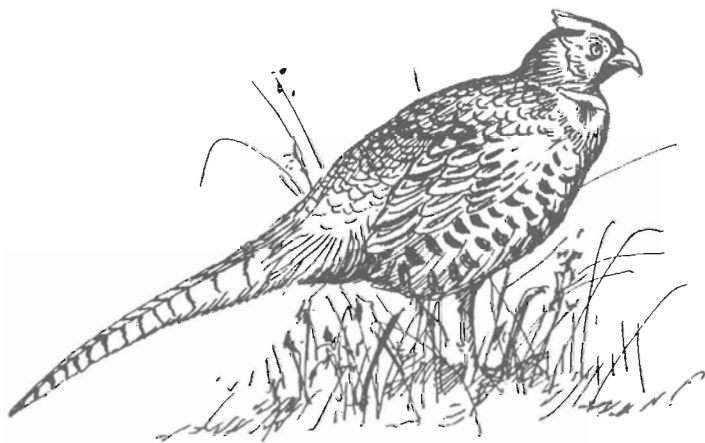
I've noticed that bird lovers are gentle people and have wondered whether they become bird lovers because they are gentle, or if loving birds softens and tenderizes that tough muscle, the human heart?

I don't know. But I do know that a little bluebird is teaching me to be still. Listening to his song has sharpened my ears to the songs of other birds, to the speech of animals, to the whispers of loved ones.

Thrilling to those heavenly wings I am more aware of the intricate design of a pansy, the revealing look on a friend's face, the need in a stranger's eye, the miracle of a poem or a painting, or a baby.

Fascinated by the infinite variety of birds, I wonder at all life's abundance—every season a new show; every face, a new drama.

When I am very still, attuned to the world within, I soar like a bird through time and space, and my wings are a radiant blue. ■





# OPERATION BLUEBIRD NEO

J. Paul and Ruth L. Perkins

"OPERATION BLUEBIRD NEO" (Northeast Ohio) was conceived late in the winter of 1963. The organizers were J. Paul Perkins, Norman Hazen, and Paul Page. Our advisor was William Highhouse of Warren, Pennsylvania. That first year we had 29 nesting boxes; by 1980 there were 90 boxes, 64 of which the authors have monitored themselves since 1973.

The boxes are close to the dimensions recommended by the North American Bluebird Society. We use what lumber we can get, so, if it is not too far off specifications, we use it "as is." Therefore, although we favor a 5 X 5 inch interior, on occasion, the inside dimensions vary from 4½ to 5½ inches.

At first we used hinges and hooks with a top-opening lid, but the price of this hardware caused us to switch to a dowel rod and a block of wood underneath the lid. In the side of the lid, we drill a hole the exact size of a double-headed 8d form nail, which can be easily grasped for removal of the lid during monitoring.

We prefer top-opening boxes to the side opening, front opening, or bottom opening because the lid can be carefully removed without disturbing the brooding female. When banding, we find that top-opening boxes disturb the young birds less; they are not apt to get excited and jump out of the box.

All boxes are painted a dark green to blend with the surroundings and make the boxes less

noticeable. We also stencil three inch numbers and our logo on the boxes. We keep the trail boxes in good repair. Some have been in use since we started our operation in 1963.

All boxes are placed on utility poles with the exception of three that are on fence posts. We have special permission from the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company to use their poles. The company has been most cooperative: when new poles have been installed, their employees have carefully removed the bird boxes. On occasion they have cut the old pole off above the box in order to avoid disturbing the young. The boxes are placed chest high (approximately 4½ feet). When possible, boxes are faced away from the prevailing northwest winds. It does not seem to matter much to the birds which direction the box faces. We usually face the boxes parallel with the road since mowing and farming activities often knock the boxes off the poles.

Our route is located in Conneaut, Ohio. Nesting boxes are placed along South Ridge Road from the Pennsylvania-Ohio state line west to State Road, south to Hatch Corners Road, south on Wetmore Road to Ohio Route 84, then east to the state line. No boxes are placed on Route 384 because of traffic problems while monitoring the boxes. A round trip over the route starting from our driveway measures 37 miles. We monitor the boxes every 7-10 days.

Bluebirds have occupied certain boxes and nested along some roads on our route for years. The last two years we found that a ridge or road formerly fine for bluebirds had completely changed with not a bluebird to be found. This leads us to believe that not all the bluebirds raised here winter in the same areas. For several years, bluebirds have been seen on our Christmas Bird Count, but those that winter in the Southeast may have been killed in uncharacteristically severe winter storms. Thus, the failure of those birds to survive on their wintering grounds may explain our observations. Perhaps also there is a local shift as

younger birds take over. Whatever the cause, our bluebirds are making a comeback after the past two disastrous years.

Box users other than bluebirds have been House Sparrows, House Wrens, Tree Swallows, and, on two occasions, Black-capped Chickadees. We find wasps, hornets, ants, and spiders which we keep cleaned out with an insect spray. For screw worm larvae, we use 1% rotenone powder. On a few occasions we have reconstructed a complete nest when it was severely infested with larvae. White-footed mice use the boxes during the off season. We leave these alone until spring clean-out time



Photograph by Al Tyler

J. Paul Perkins looks over a copy of *Sialia* as he poses with bluebird boxes which will be erected on his trail. "OPERATION BLUEBIRD NEO" and his bird banding activities have put over 18,600 miles on "Lil' Albert," his 1970 Valiant.

since they furnish winter food for other birds and animals.

Raccoons and snakes are occasionally a problem but, on the whole, animals are not bothersome on our route. House Wrens, in certain areas, have given us some trouble by puncturing eggs and throwing them out of the box. House Sparrows are the greatest problem. Not only do they take over nesting boxes, but, occasionally, they have constructed their nests over eggs or young. We try to destroy the male bird when possible, but, if the sparrows are too troublesome, we plug the hole and forget about the box for a while.

Some vandalism occurs during the nesting season, but this is usually done by kids stuffing dirt or other material into the boxes. Now and then eggs have been taken, and, twice, adult birds have been shot with BB guns. People also stop and open the boxes and look in, which is rather annoying to us.

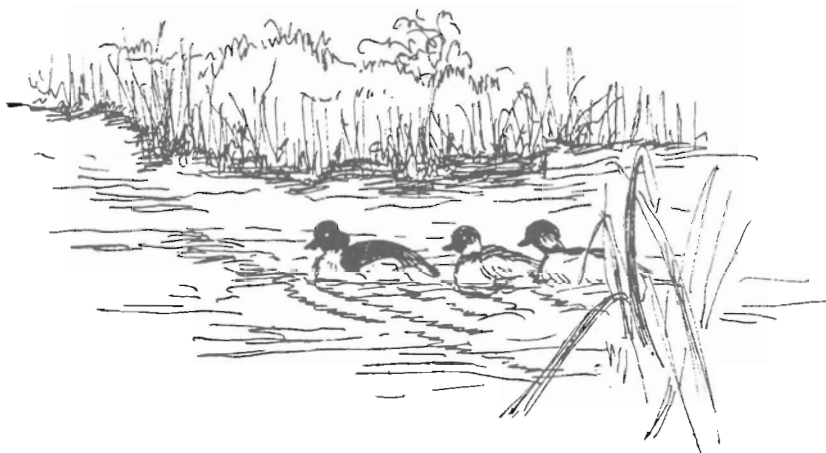
Most vandalism occurs during the winter. Boxes are stolen, smashed, or shot at by deer hunters using lead slugs in their shot-

guns. Lately, we have been bringing in all the boxes from highly vulnerable areas at the end of the nesting season. This has its advantages because then we can repair and paint the boxes.

There have been rewarding offshoots on the route. All the cows and horses along the route love us and have to be talked to when we are near the fence. We have a host of friends along the trail, and much time is spent "visiting." Then there are wild strawberries, elderberries, and blackberries to enjoy and to bring home for jams, pies, and jelly. We find many other nests of birds along the route, and these are reported to Cornell Nesting Program Records via the Brooks Bird Club of West Virginia. We have quite a collection of slides of these nests. Sometimes we take our movie camera and photograph the birds and flowers along the way.

"OPERATION BLUEBIRD NEO" has furnished us a lot of enjoyment and a chance to get out in the open. It keeps us busy in our retirement years. ■

118 Grandview Avenue  
Conneaut, OH 44030



# Prince George's County Claims to be "Bluebird Capital of the World"

Richard J. Dolesh

In the Washington, D.C., suburb of Prince George's County, Maryland, there are a steadily growing number of people who believe that Prince George's County is the "Bluebird Capital of the World."

And why not? Consider the facts.

Prince George's County boasts some of the luminaries of bluebird conservation as residents. Dr. Lawrence Zeleny, founder of the North American Bluebird Society and a pioneer in modern bluebird conservation, has lived in the county for almost fifty years. From his early bluebird successes, as well as those of people like Edgar Merkle on the Patuxent River in the 1930's, has grown a grassroots movement to save the bluebird involving hundreds, if not thousands of persons, in Prince George's County alone.

This interest and enthusiasm has not been confined to individuals; there was also a collective effort by organizations. The Prince George's County Chapter of the National Audubon Society, the Audubon Naturalist Society of the Central Atlantic States, the Maryland Ornithological Society, and the Prince George's County Beautification Committee spearheaded the drive to form the North American Bluebird Society in 1978. Many of the charter members of NABS are Prince George's County residents.

Efforts to save the bluebird have received outstanding governmental cooperation in Prince

George's County. Federal installations such as the Beltsville Agricultural Research facility of the USDA and the Goddard Space Flight Center of NASA have extensive bluebird trails laid out and monitored by volunteers. Maryland's Wildlife Administration has a trail at the Merkle Wildlife Management Area.

The local county government has been so supportive of bluebird conservation that it took the unusual step in 1976 of designating the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) as the official county bird, the first county in the nation known to name the bluebird as its own. Trails have been erected at sanitary landfills, maintenance facilities, and at a newly-acquired county equestrian center. The county sponsors "Bluebird Week" each March. Activities take place throughout the area and include hikes, trail observations, and public awareness programs.

Other local governmental agencies, notably the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), have made virtually all facilities and properties available for the installation of bluebird nesting boxes. There are bluebird trails at Rocky Gorge reservoir, Piscataway sewage treatment plant, and Western Branch sewage treatment plant. The WSSC program, begun by former chairwoman Joanna Norris, could serve as a nationwide model for sanitary districts and commissions. The M-NCPPC

has bluebird trails at regional and stream valley parks; golf courses; horticultural and forestry areas; agricultural areas; and historic sites. M-NCPPC staff members and volunteer naturalists conduct bluebird programs year-round.

Businesses and corporations have joined in support of the bluebird. Fairwood Turf Farm, owned by Eugene Roberts, has had a successful trail for over seven (monitored by volunteers) which now has been extended to the adjacent farm of Oden Bowie. Cemeteries and memorial gardens host bluebird trails. Even public utilities have been receptive to the idea of bluebird conservation. The Potomac Electric Power Company has agreed to make transmission line rights-of-way available for bluebird trails.

Youth organizations have been prominently involved in aiding the bluebird. The Camp Fire Girls have participated in activities and trail construction for nearly ten years. Their local bluebird conservation project has been expanded to a *nationwide* Camp Fire Girls project. The Girl Scouts of the nation's capital received a

*Reader's Digest* grant to build boxes and erect a trail at one of their camps in the county. A variety of youth groups have combined efforts on behalf of the bluebird. A Brownie troop, a Cub Scout pack, and a Boy Scout troop from Accokeek have cooperated to install and monitor a bluebird trail at the Ferguson Farm, an interpretive children's farm. Numerous individuals have developed bluebird trails on private land.

School teachers in the county have found the bluebird ideal for teaching principles of wildlife conservation. Several county elementary schools hold annual "bluebird festivals" which involve hundreds of children in skits, displays and ceremonies.

When all is considered, the record of bluebird conservation in Prince George's County is outstanding. It is not entirely with tongue-in-cheek that some here claim that Prince George's County is indeed the "Bluebird Capital of the World." ■

17800 Croont Road  
Brandywine, MD 20613





# Feathered Neighbors

Dallas Lore Sharp

Three native cavity nesting bird species are highlighted in the following excerpt from *A Watcher in the Woods* published by The Century Company of New York in 1907. The birds described are the Common Flicker, Eastern Bluebird, and Great Crested Flycatcher.

## High-hole

The electric cars run past my door, with a switch almost in front of the house. I can hear a car rumbling in the woods on the west, and another pounding through the valley on the east, till, shrieking, groaning, crunching, crashing, they dash into view, pause a moment on the switch, and thunder on to east and west till out of hearing. Then, for thirty minutes, a silence settles as deep as it lay here a century ago. Dogs bark; an anvil rings; wagons rattle by; and children shout about the cross-roads. But these sounds have become the natural voices of the neighborhood—mother-tongues like the chat of the brook, the talk of the leaves, and the caw of the crows. And these voices, instead of disturbing, seem rather to lull the stillness.

But the noise of the cars has hardly died away, and the quiet come, when a long-wild cry breaks in upon it. *Yarup! yarup! yarup-up-up-up-up!* in quick succession sounds the call, followed instantly by a rapid, rolling beat that rings through the morning hush like a reveille with bugle and drum.

It is the cry of the "flicker," the "high-hole." He is propped against a pole along the street railroad, nearly a quarter of a mile



Nineteenth century engraving of a Common Flicker or "High-hole" as Sharp refers to it.

away. He has a hole in this pole, almost under the iron arm that holds the polished, pulsing wire for the trolley. It is a new house, which the bird has been working at for more than a week, and it must be finished now, for this lusty call is an invitation to the warming. I shall go, and, between the passing of the cars, witness the bowing, the squeaking, the palaver. A high-hole warming is the most utterly polite function in birddom.

Some of my friends were talking of birds, not long ago, when one of them turned to me and said hopelessly:

" 'T is no use. We can't save them even if we do stop wearing them upon our hats. Civilization is bound to sweep them away. We shall be in a birdless world pretty soon, in spite of laws and Audubon societies."

I made no reply, but, for an answer, led the way to the street and down the track to this pole which High-hole had appropriated. I pointed out his hole, and asked them to watch. Then I knocked. Instantly a red head appeared at the opening. High-hole was mad enough to eat us; but he changed his mind, and, with a bored, testy flip, dived into the woods. He had served my purpose, however, for his red head sticking out of a hole in a street-railway pole was as a rising sun in the east of my friends' ornithological world. New light broke over this question of birds and men. The cars drive High-hole away? Not so long as cars run by overhead wires on wooden poles.

High-hole is a civilized bird. Perhaps "domesticated" would better describe him; though domesticated implies the purposeful effort of man to change character and habits, while the changes which have come over High-hole—over most of the wild birds—are the result of High-hole's own free choosing.

### **Bluebird.**

Among the nearest of these feathered neighbors is a pair of bluebirds with a nest in one of the bird-boxes in the yard. The bluebirds are still untamed, building, as I have often found, in the wildest spots of the woods; but seen about the house, there is something so reserved, so gentle and refined in their voice and manner as to shed an atmosphere of good breeding about the whole yard. What a contrast they are to the English sparrows! What a rebuke to city manners!

They are the first to return in the spring; the spring, rather, comes back with them. They are its wings. It could not come on any others. If it tried, say, the tanager's, would we believe and accept it? The bluebird is the only possible interpreter of those first dark signs of March; through him we have faith in the glint of the pussy-willows, in the half-thawed peep of the hylas, and in the northward flying of the geese. Except for his return, March would be the one month of all the twelve never looked at from the woods and waysides. He comes, else we should not know that the waters were falling, that a leaf could be plucked in all the bare, muddy world.

Our feelings for the bluebird are much mixed. His feathers are not the attraction. He is bright, but on the whole rather plainly dressed. Nor is it altogether his voice that draws us; the snowflakes could hardly melt into tones more mellow, nor flecks of the sky's April blue run into notes more limpid, yet the bluebird is no singer. The spell is in the spirit of the bird. He is the soul of this somber season, voicing its sadness and hope. What other bird can take his place and fill his mission in the heavy, hopeful days of March? We are in no mood for gaiety and show. Not until the morning stars quarrel together will the cat-bird or scarlet tanager herald the spring. The irreverent song of a cat-bird in the gray gloom of March would turn the spring back and draw the winter out of his uncovered grave. The bluebird comes and broods over this death and birth, until the old winter sleeps his long sleep, and the young spring wakes to her beautiful life.

## Great-crest

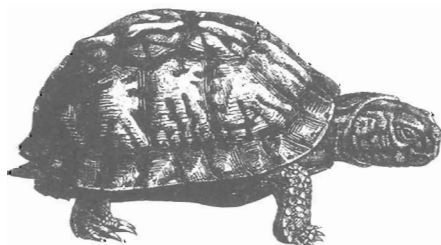
A striking illustration of this growing alliance between us and the birds is the nest of the great-crested flycatcher in the orchard. Great-crest has almost become an orchard-bird. At heart he is, and ever will be, a bird of the wilds. He is not tame—does not want to be tame; he is bold, and the dangers and advantages of orchard life attract him. His moving into an apple orchard is no less a wonder than would be an Apache chief's settling in New York or Boston.

Most observers still count Great-crest among the wild and unreclaimed. Florence A. Merriam, speaking of his return in spring, says: "Not many days pass, however, before he is so taken up with domestic matters that his voice is rarely heard outside the woods"; and in Stearn's "Birds" I find: "It does not court the society of man, but prefers to keep aloof in the depths of the forest, where it leads a wild, shy, and solitary life." This is not Great-crest as I know him. I have found many of his nests, and never one in any but orchard trees. Riding along a country road lately, I heard Great-crest's call far ahead of me. I soon spied him on the wires of a telegraph-pole. Under him was a pear-tree, and a hundred yards away a farm-house. In the pear-tree I found his nest—snake-skins and all.

I disagree, too, with most descriptions of this bird's cry. The authors I have read seem never to have heard him on a quiet May morning across a fifty-acre field. His voice is "harsh and discordant" when sounded into one's very ears. The sweetest-toned organ would be discordant to one inside the instrument. Give the bird the room he demands—

wide-early-morning fields,—and listen. A single shout, almost human it seems, wild, weird, and penetrating, yet clear and smooth as the blast of a bugle. One can never forget it, nor resist it; for it thrills like a resurrection call—the last, long summons to the spring waking. This solitary note is often repeated, but is never so rapid nor so long drawn out as the call of the flicker.

Great-crest is a character, one of the most individual of all our birds. What other bird lines his nest with snake-skins; or hangs such gruesome things out for latch-strings? He has taken up his residence among us, but he has given us pretty plainly to understand that we need not call, else I mistake the hint in the scaly skin that dangles from his door. The strong personality of the bird is stamped even upon its eggs. Where are any to match them for curious, crazy coloring? The artist had purple inks, shading all the way from the deepest chestnut-purple to the faintest lilac. With a sharp pen he scratched the shell from end to end with all his colors till it was covered, then finished it off with a few wild flourishes and crosswise scrawls. ■



# A Friend For Bluebirds In Idaho

Glenn Ray Downing

**A**mong the foothills of the Northern Rockies, when the snow still lies heavy on the peaks above, and is still plentiful on the foothills themselves, in April or even May, the azure all-blue Mountain Bluebird appears. This is a bird to match the clear blue sky of spring in these mountainous regions.

One has to find the Mountain Bluebird's habitat, for it has its own ecological niche. Go out to trails and roadways starting at about the 5,000 foot level and almost always you will find these birds on fence posts or scraggly trees that are near some woods, but which open out to fields nearby. Do not seek them in large open fields, nor will you find them in deep woods, or even in small mountain meadows that are surrounded by heavy woods. It is the "edge" these bluebirds want, and it is here they seek their nesting sites.

Although the population decline is not as drastic as that of the Eastern Bluebird, the Mountain Bluebird continues to spiral downward in numbers. Some authorities estimate that should the decline of bluebird populations continue at its present rate, these birds could disappear completely, perhaps before the end of this century, or in less than twenty-five years. One man, at least, is doing something about the Mountain Bluebird population decline. Lyon Healy of Pocatello, Idaho, has started building his second thousand bluebird houses, resulting in a project that



Photograph by Glenn Ray Downing

Mr. Healy in his Pocatello workshop.

cannot help but increase the numbers of these very beautiful and beneficial birds in Southeastern Idaho.

Mr. Healy's project started when the Portneuf Valley Audubon Society in Pocatello called upon its members to volunteer to make bluebird houses and help put them up in suitable places about the countryside. Mr. Healy was the only one to heed the call. Not only did he volunteer, but he is still at it well over a year later, and has been giving away the houses to anyone who will install them. During the past year he gave 258 to the children of the Fort Hall Elementary School who put them out around their homes on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. As a result of this generous gift to the

Fort Hall school, Mr. Healy has started a dynamic educational project, for other teachers throughout the Pocatello school district, as well as surrounding schools, have called for bluebird houses as a teaching resource in conservation.

At the beginning of the project, Dr. Charles Trost, Associate Professor of Biology at Idaho State University, had his students in ornithology join with Audubon members and set out Mr. Healy's houses in various places in the foothills around Pocatello where Mountain Bluebirds might be found. During this initial stage of the project all of the houses were numbered and their locations identified so that reconnaissance trips could be made to see whether each house was occupied by bluebirds. The results of this study are still to be analyzed. Now the project has gone well beyond this "controlled" stage, and Mr. Healy gives the houses he makes to anyone who wants to help the birds.

Mr. Healy is a retired real estate appraiser in Pocatello, and at age 76 he says that he did not intend to start a second career constructing bluebird houses. Once he got started, however, he couldn't stop, since he likes birds—and the children to whom he gives most of the houses.

Mr. Healy makes the bluebird houses from scrap lumber donated by lumber dealers in Pocatello and surrounding communities. The lumber dealers cheerfully donate the material after he explains his project. He provides the nails and wire for the houses himself.

Designed so they can be used over and over again, each house has inside dimensions of four by six inches, and is nine inches at

the back, and eight inches at the front. The entrance hole is exactly 1½ inches in diameter which keeps out the starlings. This entrance is located six inches above the floor of the house. The top of each house is attached at the back by a hinge made of innertube rubber and kept down by baling wire. This enables someone to easily clean each house, or to open them for inspection. The houses are left unpainted so the wood will weather to blend in with the surroundings.

In spite of the fact that Lyon Healy has made over a thousand bluebird houses, he has not put one up in his own backyard. Mountain Bluebirds do not nest in the valley in the town where the Healys make their home. He has, however, installed several houses for smaller birds such as chickadees, wrens, and Downy Woodpeckers. ■

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**Editor's Note:** We thank *Scenic Idaho* for permission to reprint a slightly abbreviated version of the article that appeared in the July-August 1978 issue.

Mr. Healy advised the editor in August, 1981, that his box total now stands at 1875. Ill health has forced him to discontinue further construction.

He added a note that Dr. Trost, in a recent conversation, mentioned that he had observed many bluebirds in recent years and attributed it to the numerous boxes available as nest sites.





# QUESTION CORNER

Lawrence Zeleny

**Does a bird feeder close to the nesting box discourage bluebirds?**

Mrs. Robert M. Cook  
Knoxville, TN

It may if the feeder is operated during the nesting season and is patronized regularly by House Sparrows or mockingbirds.

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**Please tell me the best color to paint a bluebird box.**

Dorothy W. Elliott  
Hampden-Sydney, VA

Although birds have good color vision, there is no firm evidence that bluebirds show any particular color preference in choosing their nesting boxes. Light-colored or even white boxes are advantageous, however, in extremely hot weather since they remain cooler inside than dark-colored boxes. Excessive heat is sometimes disastrous to bluebird eggs and nestlings. Boxes of colors that blend well with the landscape are least likely to be vandalized. I prefer a light green or light tan color. Exterior latex paints are best. Do not use paints containing lead or mercury compounds and do not paint the insides of the boxes. Boxes made of cedar, cypress, redwood, or exterior grade plywood do not need to be *painted*.

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**Can I construct bluebird boxes from laminated particle board?**

Gerald Decker  
Cairo, NY

This type of material is generally recommended for interior use only. Nesting boxes made of it would probably not be very durable.

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**Tree Swallows chase away the bluebirds. Should I drive the swallows away and destroy their nests?**

Helen W. Sanborn  
Orford, NH

Emphatically *NO!* Tree Swallows are beautiful and beneficial birds and are fully protected by federal and most state laws. If possible, supply enough nesting boxes to satisfy both the swallows and bluebirds in your area. If this is not practical try mounting some of the boxes only eight or ten feet apart. Tree Swallows may object to such close neighbors of their own kind but not to bluebirds.

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## THE ARDENT BLUEBIRD

Little bluebird on the wing,  
Oh, how lovingly you sing!  
And you try to lure a mate  
Right into your house—but wait!  
She's just shy, and so demure,  
And your wooing ways will lure  
Her much sooner than you think—  
Now, she's *almost* on the brink!

She may soon say “Yes” to you;  
Oh, indeed, it's very true!  
Give her just a gentle shove,  
Right into your house of love,  
Where you both may build your nest,  
And a family—the best!  
Go, now, put her to the test!

(He *did*, but she *wouldn't!*)

Katharine M. Braun

# Instant Weathering Protects Nesting Boxes

Warren M. McLaughlin

One of the speakers at the 1980 Annual Meeting of the North American Bluebird Society mentioned that new unpainted and newly painted nest boxes seemed to attract more vandalism than old, weathered nest boxes. It was suggested that newly built boxes be allowed to weather for a season before being put up for use.

Unfortunately I don't have the time, money, or space to weather new boxes before use. Also, each season of weathering cuts down on the productive life of the boxes. However, I can understand the psychological advantage of avoiding bright, shiny new nest boxes where vandalism is a problem. The solution seems fairly easy—even though it hasn't been tested.

A trip to a friendly paint dealer provided an answer. I explained the problem, and requested assistance in finding a paint that would protect the wood from weathering, and disguise it from vandals. After a few minutes of poking around the sample chips and catalogs, we settled on Glidden's semi-transparent oil stain in "Eucalyptus"—a silvery blue-grey that looks quite like old plywood after a year or two of real weathering.

It was not a ready-mix, so I had to get a gallon. That could have been expensive, but the proprietor gave me the paint at his cost, on condition that I never reveal the source (or his soft heart for the bluebirds). My sons have painted three NABS side-opening nest boxes, being careful to keep paint

out of the interior and the entrance hole. We seem to have enough stain left for 50 or 100 more boxes!

Although they look a little blue, all are mounted now and appear attractive, but definitely not "new" or bright. Other paints worth considering are Olympic's semi-transparent stain #908 (almost the same tone as Eucalyptus) or their #906. Cuprinol has some good tones, especially their even mix of Meadow Gold #30 and Nutmeg Brown #65, but I was concerned about the heavy preservative content of the Cuprinol. Both Cuprinol and Olympic have "Weathering Stains" that go to a nice silver-gray in a season, but those seemed too bright, and there was the preservative problem again.

If you want to try this system, I'd suggest taking a sample of "real" weathered wood with you to the store. Avoid lead content paints. Make sure the nest box is thoroughly dry and has no paint or stain on the interior before you put it into service.

While many trail operators find painting (or staining) totally unnecessary (or perhaps too expensive), I operate in a suburban area of large back yards. A painted box seems easier to place on private property—and it *will* last longer, as long as it is not vandalized! ■

9823 Fosbak Drive  
Vienna, VA 22180



\* This world isn't what it's cracked up to be \*

# A Cowbell Is Music To Their Ears

Gladys Auman Niess

Nineteen years ago my husband retired as Surgeon General of the Air Force in Washington, D.C. We built our retirement home in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The first spring we were welcomed by thirty or more Mountain Bluebirds which was such a thrill that the retired General turned his hand to building bluebird boxes. The birds swarmed in, investigating all twenty of them. We had five families almost immediately. As soon as the young fledged, we cleaned the boxes and within a short time bluebirds started rebuilding for a second nesting.

Luckily the annual miller moth (*Chorizagrotis auxiliaris*) invasion begins just when bluebird babies begin to hatch. We tried to figure out a way to attract the adult birds. Years ago we had found a cowbell on the beach in Hawaii so we decided to ring it every time we had a pan full of moths. It was amazing how quickly the bluebirds responded. Initially hesitant, they soon came closer and closer until they were practically eating out of our hands. When the young fledged, the parents would line them up on a telephone wire and teach them to respond to the cowbell.

This year we returned home in May from our winter vacation in Arizona. A neighbor, who also has bluebird boxes, told us that "our"

Mountain Bluebirds had had a battle with Violet-green Swallows. The swallows won so the bluebirds had moved to the neighbor's boxes. We no longer had a single pair. The boxes not occupied by swallows were taken over by House Sparrows. Last week we rang the cowbell even though all the bluebirds had moved away. Within a short time a pair of bluebirds arrived and we fed them moths. Was this a coincidence? It wasn't long before a pair of bluebirds did build in one of our boxes and now they have five eggs. A second pair is building in another box, too, so we're looking forward to more successful days again.

We give bluebird boxes for Christmas presents; consequently, people in the area are extremely interested in bluebird conservation and our land has become known as Niess's Bluebird Hill. We will continue to do whatever we can to encourage and protect these gorgeous, intelligent, and loveable birds. ■

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10055 Kit Carson Lane  
Colorado Springs, CO 80908

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**Editor's Note:** For bluebirders whose boxes are shared by bluebirds and swallows: Be sure to clean boxes immediately after the swallow young fledge; often bluebirds will then move in. That way two valuable species can be aided.



# Great Northern Plains Regional Meeting Report

Mary D. Janetatos



Photograph by Joseph Ondrejko

"WELCOME BLUEBIRDERS" read the giant letters appearing in the windows of a prominent building at the Brandon (Manitoba) University. The sign heralded the four-day Great Northern Plains Regional Meeting of the North American Bluebird Society, June 25-28, 1981. The events of this first-of-its-kind meeting were of such a stimulating nature that over 160 persons were attracted from all parts of the continent as well as Great Britain.

At the Third Annual Meeting it was decided that a regional meeting should be held in Canada in 1981. Lorne Scott (Saskatchewan) and Mrs. Norah Lane (Manitoba) rallied the naturalist community and received help from the Brandon Natural History Society and the Friends of the Bluebirds (Brandon). Brandon University extended its hospitality to provide printing resources, scientific expertise, and an eminently suitable place for the meeting. Thus, Canadian bluebirders have set a new standard by which to measure a conference.

Chairman Lorne Scott opened the meeting Thursday evening. The invocation was offered by Rev. Lily Vyeda,

minister and naturalist. An introduction to the varieties of birdlife in Manitoba was given by Phil Horch, a bird enthusiast and author from Winnipeg.

Friday began with field trips to Spruce Woods and Souris Bend Wildlife Management area led by Herb Goulden. This tour took us past some of the "nestlines" (Manitoban for bluebird trails) of the Prairie Provinces' 2000-mile bluebird trail. We sighted many of the startlingly beautiful Mountain Bluebirds, as well as the Eastern for the nesting cycle was in full swing. Mention was made of the hybridization which had been observed between these two species on portions of the Manitoba trails. During the picnic lunch stop at the Spruce Woods Wildlife Management Area, the ripe berries, known as "saskatoon," were eagerly searched for in the woods. Upon finding them, we Easterners from the U.S. recognized them as a form of the well-known "sarvis-berry," though these seemed sweeter and juicier. After lunch the Souris Bend Wildlife Management Area was explored for nests, raptors and wildflowers.

Friday evening's session began

with Fred McGuinness' "Field Guide to Western Manitoban Bird Watchers," revealing an impish collection of bird watching comments from a bird lover, as distinct from a bird watcher. The catbirds and robins near this Christmas tree farm west of Brandon really have distinct personalities which he described most entertainingly.

Since the Canadians have a great interest in how the central office of NABS is run, they scheduled a talk by the persons most closely associated with it: Executive Director, Mary Janetatos, and Treasurer, Chuck Dupree. They listened very closely as the story was told again of the humble beginnings of NABS with the sudden ballooning of interest resulting from the appearance of the November 25, 1979, *Parade* article, "How You Can Hear the Bluebird's Song Again" by Joan R. Heilman. Friday evening's program ended with Norah Lane's film "Bluebird of Happiness."

Saturday morning the Session Chairman was Wes Wong. Norah Lane (a charter member of NABS and member of its first Board of Directors) spoke on "Bluebirds in South Western Manitoba." She told of her late husband's interest in restoring the bluebirds. The Brandon Junior Birders was started in 1959 when she and Jack directed the interests and energies of the local youngsters to bluebird conservation. Hubert Prescott told of his efforts in "Fighting the Battle for Bluebird Survival in Oregon's Willamette Valley." Hubert described firsthand his 600-700 box trail. He reported success in pairing nestboxes in locations where Tree and/or Violet-green Swallows came in early and occupied all the boxes. This pairing practice is a welcome alternative to complaining that swallows get all the nestboxes. Duncan Mackintosh is Scotland's gift to bluebirding since 1957 when he migrated to southern Alberta. His talk "Bluebirds in Chinook County" described his Lethbridge Bluebird Project—and with a refreshing Scottish accent, too. Local newspaper coverage of Duncan's work has been colorful and complete. Just

before lunch, Bob Nero gave an exciting account of how owls can be helped in his talk entitled, "The Great Gray Owl." He then autographed copies of his book by the same name which were available at the meeting.

The afternoon session was chaired by Dick Hannah. "Calgary Area Bluebird Trails, 1973-1980" were described by Don Stiles, a geophysicist with Texaco in Calgary. He told how he and his sons assisted in monitoring the trails and how, in 1979, he took on the duties of coordinating monitors for bluebird trails in the Calgary area. [Editor's Note: See Don Stiles' name among nominees for office which accompanied the Summer 1981 issue of *Sialia*.] Art Aylesworth, a native of western Montana, described his work with Mountain Bluebirds in his talk, "Come Nest With Me." He provides a much-needed link in the Mountain Bluebird "chain" in the western U.S. "Bring Back the Bluebirds" was described in Lorne Scott's talk on this, one of many causes which he has spearheaded. Lorne has recently been honored for his fine conservation work by the government of Canada. We point with pride to the fact that he has been active in NABS as a Board Member and as a member of the Nominating Committee. "Bluebird Research in Manitoba" was discussed by Dick Rounds, Associate Professor of Geography at Brandon University. Dick has synthesized and published the data collected by John Lane. He is studying bluebirds in other research including hybridization between Eastern and Mountain Bluebirds. Dick is also an award-winning wildlife artist.

An open discussion period followed the afternoon session. The final items of the afternoon were a treasurer's report and "Concluding Remarks" by Chuck Dupree. Chuck takes such a philanthropic view of money and how it is spent that his reports are much livelier than most such summaries. In his closing remarks he stressed the hope that NABS, having won the attention of bird lovers from all over the continent, will now focus

more attention on helping ALL native cavity nesting species of birds.

Saturday evening was devoted to an elegantly presented banquet in the dining hall of Brandon University. Master of Ceremonies Dr. Robert Lane (Norah and Jack Lane's son) began the festivities with the recognition of distinguished guests in three categories: elected officials, persons connected with Brandon University, and prominent naturalists. The latter included Dr. Harvey Williams, President of the Manitoba Natural History Society and Mrs. Ilene Strickland, President of the Brandon Natural History Society. Among the elected officials were Mr. Fred Anderson, Deputy Mayor of Brandon; the Honorable E.R. McGill, Member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly; and the Honorable Walter Dinsdale, Member of Parliament. The President of Brandon University, Dr. Harold J. Perkins, pointed with gratitude to the work of naturalists like John and Norah Lane who have shone a light on the natural world around us, so that we may properly care for it as we find solutions to the problems civilization has caused.

Founder Lawrence Zeleny was the banquet speaker. His talk, "A History of Bluebird Conservation," was thorough in tracing the gradual awareness of bluebird problems, the efforts to alleviate those problems, and the ways in which an increasing number of people are joining to help the campaign to save this beautiful species.

During the course of the evening door prizes were awarded. They were items of bluebird art: a Lorne Scott photograph of a male Mountain Bluebird and lapel pins of all three bluebird species carved by Peter Sawat-sky. One pin was won by Mrs. Plant-Smith, a birder visiting from Suffolk, England.

Sunday's program included some short field trips: Prairie Habitat with Barbara Robinson and Mamie McCowan; Marsh and Woodland Habitat led by Kae Longrigg and Cliff Findlay; and Bluebird Habitat with Dick Rounds.

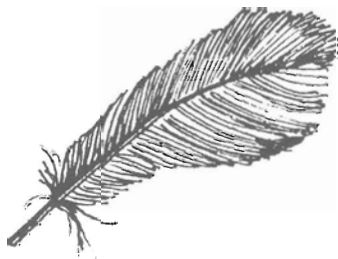
In addition to the talks and slide programs, other items of interest were available. In one spacious room there was a collection of nature art work. As I viewed these, Dick Rounds explained that the collection included items of living artists (his own beautiful paintings were there) as well as dead Canadian naturalists, notably original wildflower botanical paintings by the late Norman Criddle of Aweme, Manitoba. A "gift shop" was housed in another room. At a third location displays of nestboxes were featured and informal demonstrations of box construction took place.

A gigantic map produced by Mrs. Roger (Ann) Smith showed the miles and miles of "nestlines" reaching throughout Manitoba.

The Brandon Junior Birders did an outstanding job as security and information guides.

Dr. Roger Smith, Chairman of the Organizing Committee, with Norah Lane's guidance and inspiration, coordinated a presentation which was of memorable proportions. NABS can be sincerely proud of the job done by so many who cooperated in this effort.

As the First Regional Meeting of the North American Bluebird Society drew to a close, it became clear that a regional meeting is a wonderful way to give greater local focus to the cause of bluebird conservation. When other areas decide upon a place and time to have another regional meeting, headquarters will support their efforts in every possible way. One thing will be certain—an inspiring "first" was provided by the Canadians on those beautiful June days in 1981. ■



# Proper Planning Is the New Covenant

Adrienne Petitgout

**A**fter having a vacant bluebird house in my yard for 17 years, 1976 marked a turning point. I glanced out the window one April morning to see a pair of bluebirds inspecting the long-unoccupied box. I scarcely dared to hope they would stay, but, after several days, the female built a nest. Two broods were raised during the summer. Fall found eight bluebirds bathing in our bird bath. It was a wonderful sight to watch them and to hear their soft, melodic song. With the arrival of cold weather, they disappeared.

Each succeeding spring we waited...1978...1979...1980. What could have happened to our little friends? I had given up hope of ever having a nesting pair again. In the meantime, chickadees adopted the nesting box. We were grateful for them and enjoyed watching the little clowns. We did, however, always clean the house in the fall—just in case....

One late March Sunday this year a male bluebird arrived and inspected the bluebird box, much to our delight. Although he was not challenged by any other species, he left. My heart sank. Would he return with a female and, if he did, would she accept our accommodations? I waited, watched, and wondered. About a week later he reappeared and with him was a lady friend. In the interim, House Sparrows had moved into the house. I rushed to the local garden mart to purchase two bluebird boxes. They were quickly mounted. Then we waited. Three days later the bluebirds returned and the female built her nest in

one of the new houses.

But all was not well. Lady Blue was restless. She would leave in the early morning, return briefly during the day to sit on the nest, only to leave again. Mr. Bluebird, however, was visible often during the day. I began to realize the female was displeased with something. Finally, she returned for the male. They sat side by side on a branch for almost ten minutes. She flew away and he followed. We have not seen them since.

It is my opinion that many of the bird houses sold commercially as bluebird boxes are not really large enough. When the female sat on the nest, her head was visible from the outside. I compared the dimensions of the new houses I had purchased with those of the plans sent to us by NABS and found that those we bought locally were sadly lacking in space. Our original bluebird house is more in keeping with the recommended size.

So, here we are, stuck with brass personified—ye olde House Sparrow. We intend to start a new covenant around here. Let's hear it for faith, optimism and *proper planning*. Soon, we will order two or three bluebird boxes from NABS. Many good things will come, even bluebirds next spring! ■

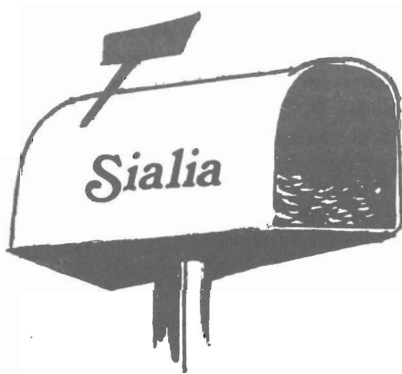
Box 15  
"Blueberry Hill"  
Gradyville, PA 19039

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**Editor's Note:** Proper planning should include a resolve to keep cleaning the House Sparrows out of your nesting boxes. You may not have nesting bluebirds, but do not add even *one* bird to the House Sparrow population.

# BLUEBIRD EXPRESS

*SIALIA welcomes the correspondence of its membership. Bluebird Express should become a forum for all who are interested in communicating their ideas and actions concerning bluebird conservation. We will attempt to publish a wide range of views in a responsible manner. Keep your letters coming!*



Dear Editor:

Received my introductory copy of *Sialia*, so exquisitely conceived and so neatly put together. It gave me an idea.

On page 44 (3:2) is the illustration of a raccoon guard. Last summer in late June my wife and I were watching our swallows at their box only 40 feet away when a tiny hawk flashed onto the scene and carried off a nearly mature bird by one leg. All the birds nearby set up a clamor of protest. Will try a raccoon guard on that box!

Have been watching bluebirds since 1916. They're my favorite.

George L. Egbert  
St. James, Michigan

Dear George Egbert:

*Thanks for your kind comments about Sialia. Much credit should go to the original editors, Jon Boone and Robert Patterson, who designed the journal.*

*A raccoon guard on a bluebird box will protect it from climbing predators, but it will not prevent winged thieves from carrying off an occasional bird. Without a description it isn't possible to pinpoint which species of hawk took the swallow. A small proportion of birds are lost in this fashion, but, normally, they do not pose a major threat to the population of bluebirds or other small birds.*

Dear Editor:

I read with some interest your article in the Spring 1979 issue of *Sialia* (pp. 46-51) and would like to contribute my 18¢ worth (that's 2¢ with considerable inflation since spring 1979).

The decline locally of the Eastern Bluebird over a period of years appears to me from observation to be from some of the following causes:

1. Decline in the population of woodpeckers (fewer nest hole excavators);
2. Decline in the use of wooden fence posts;
3. Use of Mirex and other fire-ant treatments;
4. Decline in interest. Nobody except old folks and country kids remember bluebirds, so no one furnishes nesting houses for them any more;
5. Use of doors on rural mailboxes and use of plastic newspaper tubes. When I was a kid, it was a rare mailbox or rural-delivered newspaper box that had no wren or bluebird nest.;
6. "Good forest management," whatever that means (this is a big pulpwood producing area). No dead trees for woodpecker holes and bluebird nesting sites.

There is another unmentioned pressure on bluebirds. NOBODY plants a garden any more. Even bluebirds must eat, and a good garden keeps a

family of bluebirds well stocked with food all spring and summer. Backyard gardens in suburbia would help tremendously, if not insecticided to death.

I would like your comments and those of *Sialia* readers. I can't statistically "prove" any of this, but somebody should be looking at it.

Jim L. Shirah  
Columbus, Georgia

Dear Jim Shirah:

*Somebody is looking at it! The North American Bluebird Society was founded because there was and is a tremendous concern for the fate of the bluebird. We have found that there are literally tens of thousands of people who are interested in helping. Many of them, as you suggest, are "old folks" who remember bluebirds from their childhood, but there are people of all ages (an especially heartening number of young people) who would like to help this bird return to its former abundance.*

*Some of the causes for the decline of the bluebird that you cite have been observed over a long period of time. Intensive use of insecticides, decline in the number of wooden fence posts, and monoculture in forest management have affected many bird species. I can't comment on your mention of the use of doors on rural mailboxes as a factor in the bluebird's decline. The Society does not know how important this type of nesting was on a continent-wide or even a regional basis.*

*I realize that to make your point you overstate by saying that, "NOBODY plants a garden any more," but that assertion will probably draw the wrath of all gardeners among our readership upon your head. Short grass meadows and lawns are also excellent habitats for bluebirds as long as insecticides are not used.*

*We hope that our readers do respond as you desire, Mr. Shirah.*

Dear Editor:

The little chickadees and a pair of bluebirds seemed to be in competition for our next-to-last bluebird oak log, well, the chickadees won out and raised a large family in it (at least seven or eight). The nest of the ones in the oak tree was at least four or five inches in height, and composed mostly of lint from our dryer (not nearly as colorful as the lint from Mary Janetatos' dryer) and the nest was real flat, which may be because of the large number of nestlings.

The bluebird male put on the most touching show of all this year, when he tried to entice his mate into our most recent (green) house, built by Charlie last year. He wanted her to nest so badly in it, that he even went so far as to try to show her how to build it—we watched him pull cedar strips from a piece of bark Charlie laid on the ground close by, and bring them into the house. He practically built half of the nest, coaxing her all the while,...but she acted mostly disinterested, and while she went into it a couple of times, she did not stay. We were very disappointed, and it is the first year since they first started nesting here in 1974, that bluebirds did not stay and raise little ones! It could be on account of the fact that the trees and brush have grown so much larger, and the water fountain is mostly shaded now under the taller trees.

Katharine M. Braun  
Shingletown, California

Dear Katharine Braun:

*Habitat changes do bring changes in the birdlife. Sorry about the bluebirds but you mentioned that you had chickadees. They are attractive and valuable cavity nesters, too—and all our native cavity nesters can use extra help.*





# BLUEBIRD TALES

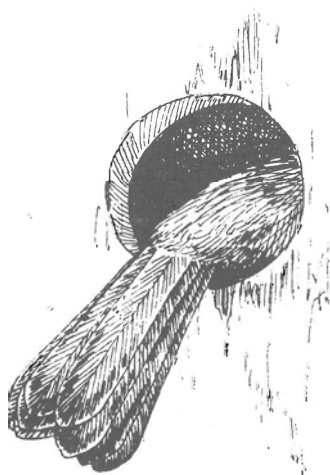
Mary D. Janetatos

Yes, dear readers, you, too, can have a bluebird family in your backyard nestbox! You may, as I did, have to wait twelve years with your nestbox located in what looks like ideal habitat. You may, as I did, have to evict countless House Sparrows. You may, as I did in the interim, have other native cavity nesting birds as tenants which, if not as beautiful, were just as welcome—Carolina Chickadees, House Wrens, Tufted Titmice, and Tree Swallows. But you can finally hope to attract bluebirds AS I DID. The big news (continued from the last issue of *Sialia*) is that bluebirds *did* nest at NABS' headquarters, and *four* healthy young bluebirds fledged.

This happy event followed a successful nesting and fledging of four Carolina Chickadees (See *Sialia*, 3: 117-118).

I was not at home to witness the fledging of the bluebirds, but was informed by office volunteer, **Marjorie Mountjoy**, that the event occurred on Monday, June 29. My own travels had taken me to the northern reaches of the continent where, in Brandon, Manitoba, I attended the Great Northern Plains Regional Meeting of NABS.

In Canada, seeing the startlingly lovely Mountain Bluebirds everywhere was one big thrill. Another was meeting some of the pioneers as well as present day activists in bluebirding including **Hubert Prescott** of Eugene, Oregon; **Art Aylesworth** of Ronan, Montana; **Stuart Huston** of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; and **Duncan Mackintosh** of Lethbridge, Alberta. While in Brandon, I was the house guest of **Norah Lane** and met her son **Bob**, daughter-in-law **Gail**, and grandson, **David Lane**. Another attendee from



the Washington, DC, area, **Frances Ehlers**, was the house guest of **Jean Cross**, a Brandon naturalist and neophyte bluebirder. The other East Coast attendees **Joe Ondrejko** of Arlington, VA; **Bob Schutsky** of Drumore, PA; **Chuck Dupree**, NABS' treasurer, of Elkridge, MD; and **Larry Zeleny**, NABS' Founder, from University Park, MD, all stayed in the Brandon University dormitory. Early morning as well as late evening birding trips were many, and soon visitors took on a haggard look; however, rest was obtained only after tracking down the seldom-seen species we sought.

After the exhilarating meeting, we continued birding during a visit to Riding Mountain National Park in north central Manitoba. There, the wild flowers and wild animals added to our impressive list of sightings. Crowning our stay in Canada was our "Dominion Day" visit to **Lorne** and **Joan Scott** in Indian Head, Saskatchewan, Lorne's "Conservation" float won first prize in its category. We also visited the Wascana Nature Center in Regina where Lorne is the naturalist. I wound up the Canadian portion of my vacation that evening when my companions delivered me to the Regina bus station. I rode all night sleepily half-conscious of such exotic place names as Moose Jaw, Medicine

Hat and others. I reached Lethbridge, Alberta, the next morning where I was met by my sister and brother-in-law, **Marty** and **John Nelson**. As they drove me to their home in Great Falls, Montana, I fervently resolved to return to Canada as soon as I could (in the summertime, I think).

My week in Montana was relaxing and amusing as I renewed acquaintance with my four nieces: **Tia**, **Patti**, **Christi** and **Diana**. They teased me by mounting the gift cedar nest box I gave them upsidedown on their deck railing. I have a lot of educating to do there I can see.

When I finally arrived home two and a half weeks after I'd left, a pleasant surprise greeted me. I learned that **Joan Rattner Heilman**, author of the *Parade* bluebird article, would be visiting briefly within a day or two. This was welcome news indeed, and plans were made immediately for a small brass band—red carpet reception. Our welcome was limited, not by our desire to show her a good time, but by the impossibility of demonstrating our real feelings completely. What do you do for the person who is responsible for a very fine article on the bluebird's plight which was read by millions of people across the country—80,000 of whom wrote to NABS asking how *they* could help bluebirds? After meeting her train, we took her for a brief visit to see Chuck Dupree's "Cavity Nester Trail" at the Goddard Space Flight Center. That evening a small group gathered for a potluck picnic. Next morning Mrs. Heilman was given a complete tour of Larry Zeleny's bluebird trail at the USDA's Beltsville "Big Farm." She was completely enthralled by the many intimate sightings of nestbirds in all stages of growth: eggs, nestlings, ready-to-fledge young, and even a late-singing male (they are usually quiet after their spring territorial singing). Then, after lunch, she went back to New York on the train. We hope she comes back soon so more of us can extend our hospitality and convey our gratitude to her for

helping to alert the public to the problems of the bluebird.

**Nancy M. Gilbert** of Somers, NY, recently purchased several copies of Larry Zeleny's book, *The Bluebird*. She, along with **Margaret** and **Bill Carpenter**, have organized a "Save the Bluebirds Committee" in their Heritage Hills community. The following quotation is taken from the *Heritage Hills Reporter* of June 20, 1981, "...the red-breasted Eastern Bluebirds are moving to Heritage Hills in growing numbers. The Heritage Hills setting of open fields and lawns interspersed with trees is very attractive to the birds and, to further encourage the species, SAVE THE BLUEBIRDS residents have posted 40 specially designed nesting boxes this spring." **Mrs. Bob Raleigh**, of Lanark, IL, tells of House Sparrow problems: "They (House Sparrows) had used the bluebird houses for roosting....6 pairs of bluebirds (tried) to build their nests (in our boxes) this spring. They gave up, after being tormented by the sparrows...."



**ALERT TO ALL BLUEBIRDERS.** We *must* have a sparrow control program underway at all times! Those pesky sparrows are overrunning us due to a serious human error in introducing them here. Human effort is necessary to control them, or their impact on *all* small native cavity nesting birds will be devastating.

In conclusion, **Alice W. Clark**, wife of the Rev. Dr. Alton C. Clark, Chaplain of the House of Representatives of the state of South Carolina, writes: "If you want to know where the bluebirds have gone, come here! Twenty-five miles n.w. of Columbia on 'Bluebird Hill' last fall my husband saw 53 on power lines, just out of our yard as he was walking. We have allways catered to them—boxes, water, food...."

Keep it up all of you out there, and soon North America will once again be the land of the bluebirds! ■

*Sialia* readers will notice that one of our regular features, "Plantings for Bluebirds and Other Wildlife," is missing from this issue. The author, George N. Grant, cites both business and personal reasons in asking to be relieved of the assignment.

Our debt to George is great for sharing his knowledge in this important field. For more than two years he enthusiastically helped bluebirders determine plantings (primarily native trees and shrubs) attractive to birds and other wildlife. His comprehensive chart, published in two issues (2:160-162; 3:28-31), represents a significant reference tool for those planning wildlife plantings on almost any scale.

Your editor feels that this important series should be continued. If you have a strong interest in and some experience with native plantings for wildlife and would like to make regular or periodic contributions to *Sialia*, send a sample of your work to the editor (using a format similar to that which has been used by Mr. Grant). All submissions will be given careful consideration.

Jo Solem

(New York—continued from page 126)

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13 Beam Place, Haledon, NJ 07508 (Speiser);  
250 Canterbury Drive, Ramsey, NJ 07446  
(Benzinger).

(Goddard—continued from page 128)

the mating flight or heard the mating song of the Carolina Chickadee? Or how many of you have watched a Carolina Chickadee excavate a nesting cavity in the rotten wood of a two inch diameter snag? Share your experiences with others by recording your observations.

Enjoy your own bluebird trail, but if it turns out to be a native cavity nester trail instead, accept it as providing double or triple the enjoyment of a single species trail!

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Founded in 1978, THE NORTH AMERICAN BLUEBIRD SOCIETY is an incorporated non-profit organization determined to increase the populations of the three species of bluebirds on this continent. Inasmuch as the populations of these birds have diminished due to the maladroit actions of human beings, as well as other natural disasters, the primary objective of the SOCIETY is to educate all who will listen about the importance of preserving these singular creatures in their native environment.

Toward this end, the SOCIETY will work, within the bounds of effective conservation, to study those obstacles impeding bluebird recovery; to publish results of those studies; to promote ideas and actions which might reduce the effect of those obstacles; and to obtain a more complete knowledge about bluebird ecology, in the hope of learning more about the ecology of humankind.

Membership: Students (under 21) and Senior (over 60), \$7.50; Regular, \$10; Sustaining, \$30; Supporting, \$50; Contributing, \$100; Corporate, \$100; Donor, \$250. Amounts over \$5 are tax deductible.

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