



Bluebirds, an Environmental Stewardship Opportunity for Golf

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Eastern bluebird. *Sialia sialis*. Slightly larger than a house sparrow, the only blue bird with a brown breast. Nests in cavities, and feeds primarily on insects. Breeds in semi-open country (Peterson, p. 173, Information Packet).

People and the environment both benefit when Eastern bluebirds are provided with nest boxes, habitat, and protection from predators. Populations of this insect-eating bird are on the rise in areas where bluebird trails are established and monitored. People can enjoy watching this beautiful bird. Often perceived to be rare and secretive, the bluebird is neither. For this social bird, nest boxes can be very close to human activity. For some

people, there is the mystique that bluebirds represent a pristine environment. When a person establishes and maintains a bluebird trail, there is a reward of self-satisfaction. A bluebird trail on a golf course enhances the environmental awareness of both golf course staff and golfers.

Wisconsin golf courses are ideal habitat for bluebirds. Most courses are semi-open with trees for perching and protection. Vegetation in roughs (areas of the golf course other than teeing grounds, putting greens, and hazards) is similar to the short grass prairie where the bluebird was once abundant. Golf courses encompassing 100 to 150 acres typically have a rough area of 40 to 90 acres (Beard, p.237).

When golfers are asked why they golf, the first response is "to play the game," but there is usually a second reason related to the environment. Depending on how the survey is worded, this may be the pleasure of open spaces and fresh air, the beauty of the golf course, or the observation of wildlife. For many golfers, seeing a bluebird would be a special event.

An agreement among three groups.

The Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association (WGCSA), the North American Bluebird Society (NABS), and UW-Madison have agreed to work together through education to increase the populations of Eastern bluebirds on Wisconsin golf courses.

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NABS is a non-profit organization "determined to increase the populations of the three species of bluebirds in North America." States have affiliate chapters and ours is the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin. The headquarters of NABS moved to Darlington, WI last year. Carol McDaniel spearheaded the society's move. NABS has compiled the hands-on experiences of their members' bluebird successes and failures, and this knowledge base is available through their library of printed and visual materials. They also provide speakers and displays. Carol McDaniel will be the featured speaker at the educational session of the WGCSA April meeting at Abbey Springs, Lake Geneva.

The goals of the WGCSA in this bluebird project are to provide education for members, and to promote environmental stewardship. Educational opportunities will be included in mailings from the Brookfield headquarters, and educational materials will be available at meetings. Recently the WGCSA Board of Directors "voted unanimously to become a corporate member of the North American Bluebird Society" (letter from president Scott Schaller).

UW-Madison will provide expertise and advice. Contacts are Gary Gaard, Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program at the Noer Facility, and Professor Scott Craven, Department of Wildlife Ecology.

The pesticide issue.

Is a bluebird on a Wisconsin golf course threatened by pesticide exposure? Probably not, since bluebird habitat is the rough where almost no pesticides are used. During the season 90% of pesticides (fungicide) is applied to less than 5% (greens and tees) of golf course area, and fungicide treatment for snow mold is late in the fall, after bluebird fledging. Insecticide use in Wisconsin is usually curative spot treatment. Golf course superintendents are certified to use and apply pesticides appropriately and properly. They also have to justify budgets and maintain application records. Wildlife is observed daily by both staff and golfers so problems may be readily apparent and more quickly resolved.

Timely tips from NABS.

Mature male bluebirds return to Wisconsin around the 15th of March to select their nest site, so ideally old

nesting materials should be removed and houses repaired before this time. If you can't get houses ready until later, you might still get younger birds returning later, or birds raising a second brood.

Avoid placing nest boxes too close together (especially in pairs) to reduce interference by tree swallow which out-compete bluebirds for territory. House spacing of 100 yards is recommended.

Data comparing fledging from various kinds of nest boxes establishes the Gilbertson nest box as the most successful. The Gilbertson is made from 4" PVC with a 1/2" conduit support pole. Materials for house and pole are approximately \$5. Moving this house to a new location is quick and easy, and a hammer to drive the support is the only tool needed.

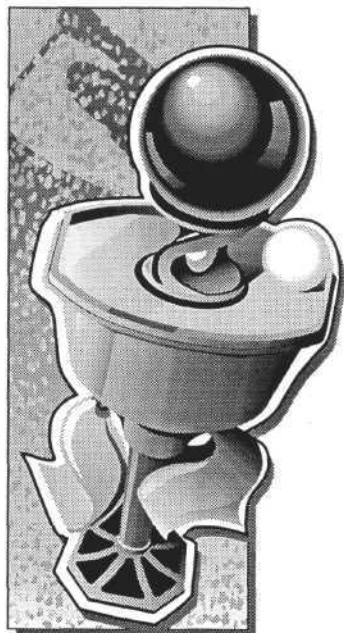
Literature Cited

Beard, James B. Turf Management for Golf Courses. Macmillan Publishing Company.

Peterson, Roger Tory. A Field Guide to the Birds, second edition, Houghton Mifflin.

Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, Inc., Information Packet. ♣

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