



# Eastern Bluebirds, Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents

By Gary Gaard, Retired

**The Author.** *Some Superintendents may remember me from a short stint at the Noer' Turf Disease Diagnostic Lab. In the mid 1990's my Department, Plant Pathology, had a retirement, a cancer, and a resignation in the turf program. I accepted the challenge of a short-term fill in, and worked with Dr Doug Maxwell who was also temporary until new staff could be hired. I had lab experience, but no field experience in turf other than home lawns.*

*In 1997 I placed 40 bluebird houses at University Ridge Golf Course (joined by cart path to the Noer), but had only four baby bluebirds. Now I pay particular attention to nest safety, equipment used, and the exact footprint of where bluebird houses are placed. In 2010 the same property fledged 200 baby bluebirds. With change such as additional houses at the Noer, the University's new Cross Country Trail, and continuing increase of the Eastern Bluebird population, I predict next year over 250 bluebirds fledged.*

*For a while my bluebird hobby got out of hand - I was spending 20hrs a week plus a couple thousand dollars a year for travel and materials. But I was increasing the bluebird population by 1,000 per year. I've cut back by finding other folks to care for several bluebird "trails".*

*In April 2006 I did a bluebird program at the WGCSA meeting at Lake Geneva, and have had several articles in Grass Roots. Currently I work part time for Aron Hogden at University Ridge assisting with wildlife habitat enhancement, culture of native plants, control of invasive weeds and trees, education, and the Audubon certification process.*

## Why bluebirds?

Indeed, some folks view anybody that tends bird-houses as a tree hugging loony. However there are good reasons for a golf course superintendent to have bluebird houses. You promote your course as wildlife habitat, and you're making a legitimate effort to re-establish a wild bird that for many years was hard-pressed just to survive. Maintenance staff is truly interested in natural events on the course - I monitor bluebird houses on several golf courses and there's always someone that announces "The bird man is here!" when I arrive and there's always someone who asks "How many bluebirds?" when I leave. Golfer surveys find "natural sur-



Glenn O'Bear with the Iron Grandma of Bluebird Houses

roundings" as the second most popular reason for playing golf - for some golfers it's a real treat to see any wildlife, and the fact that you're doing a little extra may impress members and/or clientele. A trail of bluebird houses is an excellent way to promote citizen participation - for example, building houses could be an Eagle Scout or school project, or you could get local volunteers to maintain and monitor the houses. And finally, client, member, or community involvement is a fantastic way to showcase the diverse environment of a golf course.

## Information sources

With Google and libraries you can get more (often false and/or irrelevant) information than you could ever digest. Start with the excellent home page of BRAW.org and link to the NABS site. Or contact Audubon International headquarters in Selkirk, NY, as they deal specifically with golf courses.

Here are some answers to Eastern Bluebird FAQs; diet is insect, winter is Texas and Mexico, a few stay the winter in Wisconsin, 4-5 eggs are blue (rarely eggs are white), incubation is two weeks, and egg hatch to fledge is just a little over two weeks. Contact me and we can chat or I'll give a personal tour of our work at University Ridge.

## What to expect

Prairie Restoration experts have more prairie establishment success in sites that are "high and dry". Pre-settlement bluebirds nested in cavities, presumably

hollows in the oaks that survived fires in short grass prairies. So if your course is high and dry with savannah and Tall Fescue surrounds (Long View Golf) expect success with bluebirds, but if your course is low and wet (The Swamp Golf) with cattail and Reed Canary Grass expect only a few bluebird nests.

When I first had bluebird nests I viewed myself as a hero, as I felt I was doing something extremely difficult. Wrong - most golf courses are excellent bluebird habitat and with very basic understanding of house placement, design, and safety anyone can attract nesting bluebirds.

Bluebirds are territorial and the male will not tolerate another male in his territory. Audubon Society recommends three or more acres per house, so on nine holes you may have 5-7 good sites. Expect most of your houses to have bluebird nests sometime during the breeding season (late March to early September). If unsuccessful you have too many houses or the house is at an inferior site and should be moved. Bluebirds normally have two families in a breeding season. Don't expect just one nest per birdhouse per year - wrens, chickadees, and Tree Swallows also find the houses to be a fine place to raise a family. At University Ridge I average 1.75 nests of native birds per house per year.

Bluebird houses are not just for golf courses in the country. Urban courses can have excellent bluebird successes. I tend seven houses at Odana Municipal (Ray Shane city parks oversight and Jeff Jushka superintendent), which abuts the much traveled West Beltline Highway in urban Madison. This summer all seven houses had bluebird nests at the same time. In September and October the seven adult pairs plus their offspring gathered in small flocks to prepare for migration. Odana staff and clients saw flocks of 10 - 20 - or even 40 bluebirds.

### How much labor is involved?

I check houses every 14 days during the breeding season. At University Ridge, I drive a cart past the houses several times a week and have enough experience to know, from a distance, if nests are normal. Sometimes I place houses as part of an experiment, or as a temporary check to see if the area can sustain more nests.

The folks from BRAW (Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin) monitor houses every week. This is fine for the accuracy and good vibes of Citizen Science. But it's twice as labor intensive as need be. After all, they're about gathering census numbers, not data for controlled and replicated experiments.

You don't have to do either census or science. But it is an absolute must to always remove nests as soon as the babies leave the nest. Old nests hold moisture. Blow fly lays eggs in wet bedding, and a second nest built on top of a first nest will have maggots that bite nestlings to fatality.

### Red flags

Be sure, if someone gives or offers to build houses for you, that houses are safe and built to specifications (house design is over rated, significantly trumped by habitat) attractive to bluebirds. Really, the effort and time comes after houses are built - someone will have to place, maintain, and monitor. Or you could purchase assembled houses. I sell assembled houses for \$10, but you have to get the predator-proof pole - Menards for less than \$5. The last I saw BRAW was selling house with poles for \$40 at garden shows, but they may cut a deal or even have grant money for a golf course bluebird trail.

One person that took over one of my trails placed houses in mowed areas, including the front lawn. This is ill advised, as you are managing a golf course not a show case for bird houses. A reasonable number of houses (normally less than one house per hole) should be foot printed in roughs and out of play.

Golf courses developments with many homes often feed sparrows. Or the homes may have bluebird houses that either attract your bluebirds (congratulations to them) or breed House Sparrows. Sparrows compete with and may kill your bluebirds. If sparrows invade, evict any that try to nest!

Be aware throwing chickadees, wrens, and Tree Swallow nests (native species, compared to the invasive House Sparrow) in the bushes (to increase bluebird production) is a violation of federal law. Anyone monitoring houses on your course should know up front that you will report such actions to wildlife officials.

Volunteers may expect to use a cart and bring a friend(s). Decide if you want a team to monitor houses - tasks involved tend to work best if assigned to only one person. Finally, but very important, be sure volunteers are trained in golf etiquette and safety. Decide early and up front when it is acceptable for them to be on the course.

### Glen at the Iron Grandma

This house is between 12 green and 13 tees at University Ridge. Iron Grandma is a Holstein dairy cow descriptor for long and exemplary milk production, and we call this site the Iron Grandma because it has fledged two nests (one year it had three) of bluebird every year since it was first placed 12 years ago. Fall 2010 we replaced the house (some would consider this house of obsolete design, but why change success?) with an identical one an older gentleman dropped at the front door of the Noer. According to Audra, he gifted four houses because "I just like to build bird houses".

Glen O'Bear is President of the UW-Madison Turf Club and interns at University Ridge. Ask him about surfing Lake Michigan on the only day in history that winds were higher than the day of the sinking of the Edmond Fitzgerald. I gave him the board with the entrance hole from the original Iron Grandma - long wear by baby bird toes inside the house wore half way through a 1" board. 🌿