

Tartan Park Blues

By Linda K. Janilla

Any visitor to Tartan Park, whether it be for golf, tennis, picnic or just a walk about, will notice that the park planners and maintenance people have paid great attention to the needs of the wildlife in the area. Ponds, prairies, landscaping, woodlands have not just been designed to make an interesting golf challenge. There are people in the background who have worked very hard to develop a place of enjoyment for visitors and, at the same time worked hand-in-hand with nature to encourage wildlife. We see the results — ducks, geese, songbirds, deer and even loons, and more. You can also see the “Tartan Park Blues” — no, not a new jazz group — the Eastern Bluebird!

Ten years ago, you probably would not have seen this songbird here. In fact, counters during a bird census were lucky to count 50 in the entire state of Minnesota! However, at one time the Bluebird was said to be as common as robins! The Bluebird is the same family as the robin — a bit smaller with a brilliant blue back and rust-colored breast. Several factors affected the Bluebird population. Mankind has an obsessive desire to neaten everything — and cut down dead trees that provided homesites for the Bluebird. They are cavity nesters that make use of old woodpecker holes. Man also introduced the House (English) Sparrow and the starling in an attempt to populate his new country with the birds of his old country. These birds, being non-native, had no natural enemies and their numbers soared. They are also cavity nesters and, being more aggressive, soon usurped available nest sites. Concerned people have formed groups to try to rectify this situation. The Bluebird Recovery Program of Minnesota has been educating people and helping start Bluebird “trails” for over 10 years.

I became involved in the Bluebird Recovery Program in 1984. In 1986, I approached 3M's Tartan Park management and maintenance people. Armed with books and sample bird-

houses, I sought permission to start a bluebird trail. Six birdhouses were placed in the spring of 1986 and nine baby bluebirds were fledged (fly out of birdhouse at 17-21 days old). In 1987, the birdhouse count was increased to 18 and a total of 15 bluebirds fledged. Other birds use the house, and it was discovered that competition from tree swallows was decreasing the success of bluebirds. A technique called pairing was tried at Tartan Park. The birdhouses are erected in pairs 15 feet apart. This allows each bird to have a house and not allow the tree swallow to overtake the entire trail. This was successful, and in the season of 1988 the bluebird fledging numbered 41 with no increase in houses. There would have been even more bluebird babies in 1988, but raccoons destroyed many eggs and young in the nest. It was the year of the drought, and raccoons did not have their normal supply of food. They quickly discovered a free lunch and climbed the birdhouse poles to feast. The drought continued and 1989 had raccoon predation limiting the bluebird success to 38 fledged. A possible solution to the raccoon problem is to install inverted metal cones on the posts. Joe Moris, Tartan Parks golf course superintendent, came to the rescue and soon the cones were in place. 1990 yielded 64 baby bluebirds. 1991 success was 50 birds fledged — but note that two houses were removed from the trail. Last year, 1992, was the top so far with 80 fledglings.

Setting up a bluebird trail is more than putting up birdhouses. Maintaining the trail is necessary. Checks are made about weekly. A check would consist of counting eggs/babies, noting other bird species using boxes, evicting the unprotected species (house sparrows, starlings, mice, wasps), dusting for blowfly larvae that feed by sucking blood from the nesting birds, noting and combatting predator problems — including man! etc.

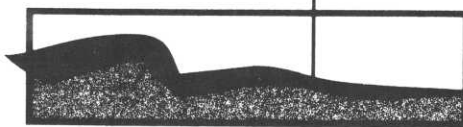
This spring my friends at park maintenance have again kindly given needed assistance. Twenty-eight more posts have been installed and are waiting for houses that are being readied in my garage. We can look forward to a good year! My heartfelt thanks goes to Joe Moris and his crew for all their help and support. Thanks to Curt for his post pounding and the Pro Shop for use of golf carts. And a big thanks to park management for its initial permission.

So, welcome to Tartan Park! Keep your eyes open for those oddly shaped bird houses and watch out for me and my flying golf cart. Most of all, be ready to be welcomed with a sweet song by our Tartan Park Blues!

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