



HOLE NOTES

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FACTS YOUR FOLKS DIDN'T TELL YOU ABOUT THE BIRDS AND THE TREES

Gems of Blue

By John G. Hauser

The Bluebird Recovery Program (BBRP) of Minnesota has been working with Minnesota Golf Courses for several years now. The big impetus behind this movement is the general belief that Golf Courses have ideal habitat for Bluebirds. This writer has visited nearly 2-dozen Golf Courses in the State mostly in the Twin Cities. Because of the Audubon International Certification program, many Golf Courses are already involved with bluebirds and have a bluebird trail or at least some bluebird boxes. But too often problems exist. Often bluebird trails are started with good intentions, and little or minimum knowledge about how to properly set up, monitor, and maintain a bluebird trail. Bluebirding is not for everyone, but if your Golf Course is interested in maintaining a bluebird trail, BBRP wants you to be successful and we are here to help in any way we can. We encourage Golf Courses to become "Supportive Members" of BBRP. In that way they will be well informed and have access to all the tools, equipment, and information necessary to fledge bluebirds.

Some of the Services BBRP has to Offer are: Initial inspection and evaluation of your golf course to fledge bluebirds; determine number of boxes to install on trail based on acreage and habitat; suggest specific site and orientation of each box on your trail; pro-

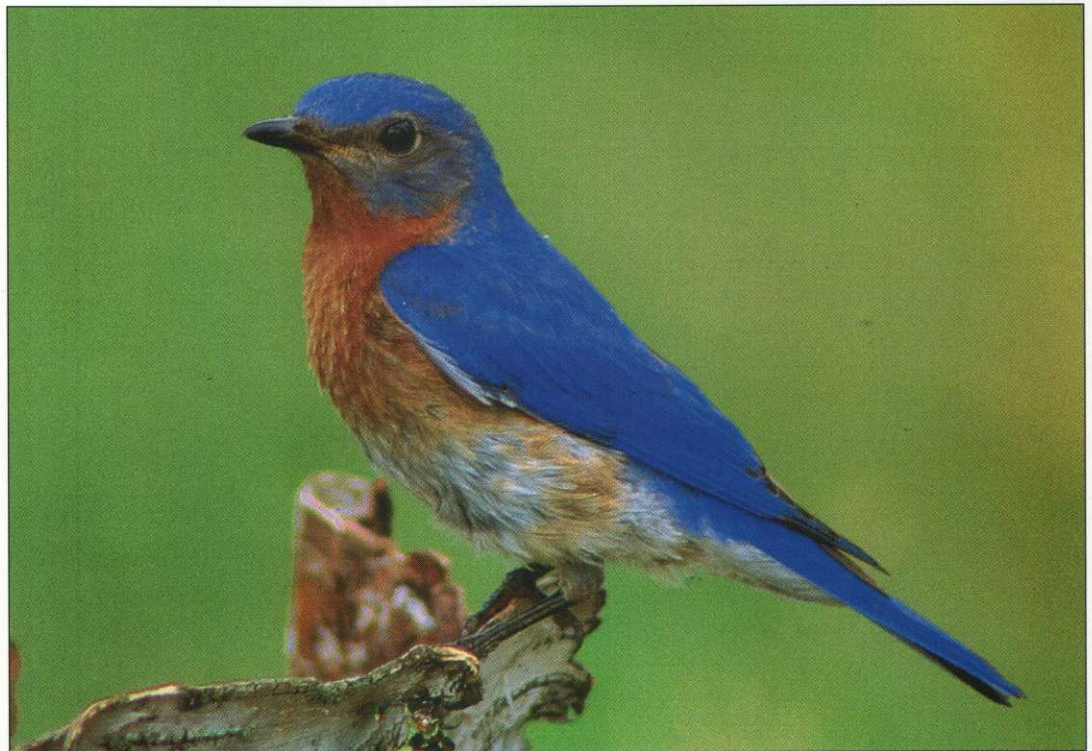


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vide list of low cost box suppliers; provide important information about proper mounting of boxes; help train an employee on proper monitoring and provide a monitoring book; assist in the control of house sparrows and other predators; County coordinator available for consultation and assistance in your area; provide several plans to make your own bluebird boxes; free Annual Bluebird Conference with expert speakers and exhibits; berry bush seedlings are available each spring at low cost; wealth of literature including a quarterly Newsletter and our own book "Bluebird Trails."

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PERIODICAL

PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY

Bluebirds —

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BBRP's Mission Statement is: To encourage, inspire, educate and assist individuals and organizations to become actively involved in the restoration and preservation efforts to sustain a healthy and expanding population of bluebirds and other cavity nesters. Goal #1: To be protective of the earth's natural resources, plants and wildlife in the environment in which we carry out these efforts.

The BBRP would like to form a partnership with as many specific Golf Courses as possible, just like the partnership we have formed with MGCSA. In order for this partnership to be successful, we need the commitment of both parties to make it work. There are many things a Golf Course can do to help. One of the most important requirements for a successful bluebird trail is to have someone monitor the trail on a weekly basis. To monitor a box means that they open and check each box once per week for about 15 weeks. Normally, this chore is done by one of the Golf Course employees, preferably by one who is interested in birds. If a Golf Course cannot provide an employee to do this work, sometimes BBRP can arrange for a volunteer to monitor the trail. However, the best monitor is an interested employee because he/she is on site every week and therefore can observe most problems. With the help of a golf cart, a monitor can check a 10-box trail in about 15 minutes, so the financial commitment is minimal. A well monitored trail can be successful, even in the middle of the

Twin Cities. A good example of that is Francis Gross Golf Course, near downtown Minneapolis right near freeway I 35W. Last year they fledged 25 bluebirds in only 4 paired boxes. That's an outstanding fledge rate of 6.25 bluebirds fledged per available box.

The following is a wealth of information about how to start and maintain a bluebird trail.

Why Do Bluebirds Need Our Help?

In the past, people who grew up in rural areas or on farms were often privileged to see bluebirds nesting in tree holes or rotten fenceposts. Poets and songwriters praised their beauty, their happy warbling, cleanliness, serenity and family devotion. Bluebirds were an asset to farmers and gardeners, as their diet consists mainly of insects and grubs in spring and summer, then wild berries in late fall as they prepared to migrate south for the winter.

The eastern bluebird range covers the entire eastern half of the United States and lower Canada, west across the Great Plains, to mountain and western bluebird habitats. They may overlap with other bluebird species in Montana and Arizona, and in western Canada.

From the 1920s, a gradual decline in the number of these beautiful blue thrushes began, becoming drastic by the 1950s. Bluebirds depended upon woodpeckers and other cavity makers for nesting holes. But dead trees slowly disappeared, considered by humankind either unsightly, or necessary for firewood. Mature trees taken for building were not replanted. Wooden fenceposts were replaced with metal ones.

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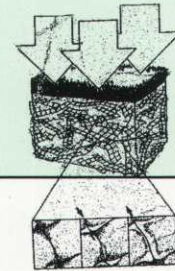
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Bluebirds—

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Increased use of insecticides compounded the problems. House sparrows (formerly called English sparrows) and European starlings, introduced in the east, spread westward, usurping nesting cavities, but, worse, destroying adult bluebirds, nestlings and eggs. House sparrows remain the worst avian enemy of bluebirds, their populations bolstered by indiscriminate bird feeding and untended bluebird nestboxes.

Individuals in the U.S. and Canada began experimenting with bluebird trails – placing well-designed nestboxes in suitable habitat. In the late 1970s the North American Bluebird Society, based in Maryland, and the Minnesota Bluebird Recovery Program began offering nestbox plans and helpful information. The spread of regularly monitored bluebird nestboxes placed in proper habitat has markedly increased bluebird populations. A network of bluebird organizations now exists across North America, as “bluebirding” has become one of the few environmental causes in which individuals can actively participate, yielding positive results, personal pleasure and satisfaction.

Habitat, Nesting and Rearing Young

Usually, bluebirds nest only in rural areas and in the outer suburban developments. House sparrows, starlings and wrens have driven them, and other song birds, from small towns and cities. The ideal habitat is free from under brush, wide open, but with a single tree, sapling, fence line, or overhead wire

where bluebirds can perch to observe the nestbox, field, pasture, meadow or gravel pit. They prefer open ground with sparse vegetation or short grass for feeding. A wooded area at least 200 feet from the nestbox will provide protection for the newly-fledged young bluebirds while keeping wren problems to a minimum. A single tree, sapling or artificial perch 100 feet from the nestbox can



serve the fledglings as a half-way stop on the way to the protective woods. It will also provide an observation post for the parents.

Existing fenceposts should not be used for mounting nestboxes. Fencelines can become predator highways (for raccoons, squirrels, weasels, cats and snakes). Do not place nestboxes on trees, power or telephone lines. The best mounting is a smooth metal pole, protected from climbing predators.

In the Upper Midwest, bluebirds arrive in March or early April. Nestboxes should be clean and ready in mid-March. (However, it is never too late. Bluebirds may reconstruct a failed nest or build a second nest in a new area, and, in fall,

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Bluebirds —

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migrating bluebirds will inspect nestboxes.)

Bluebirds will search diligently for days or weeks to find acceptable nesting sites. The male takes the initiative. A week or more may elapse between selection and actual start of nest building. The nest, built in 1-6 days, will be composed of thin grass or smooth weed stems, sometimes pine needles, made into nest cup shape. One egg is laid each day, with five the average. Eggs are usually light blue, occasionally white. Both adults feed the young in the nest for 16 to 22 days.

Young bluebirds, naked at hatching remain so for several days, and extremely susceptible to cold, are brooded by the female until 5-6 days old. They are fed small, soft insects every few minutes from dawn to dusk. By the twelfth day the nestlings are almost adult size; natal down is replaced by soft grey and blue juvenile plumage, with the typical thrush's spotted breast. They are now fed larger insects such as grasshoppers.

The fledglings can fly 100 feet or more from the nestbox directly to a high perch, and do not return to the nest. The empty nest will be a little flattened, but almost as immaculate as when it was built, for the adults remove fecal matter scrupulously.

The male parent usually takes over the care of the fledglings while the female starts a second nest, often in the same or a nearby nestbox. Older fledglings have been observed helping too feed the second brood! Infrequently, a third nesting may occur.

It's Easy to Start a Bluebird Trail!

A bluebird trail is a series of nestboxes mounted on smooth metal pipes. A coat of car wax or silicone on the pipe will provide extra insurance. A light stain or paint may be applied outside of the nestbox, but do not use wood preservative or green-treated lumber. Where tree swallows may also be present, boxes may be placed in pairs: two boxes 10-15 feet apart, with 100-150 yards to the next pair of nestboxes. Boxes should be in the open areas with the entrance hole at least 5-6 feet above the ground, away from

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Bluebirds—

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late afternoon sun, prevailing strong wind; and facing a tree or perch, not a roadway or highway. Avoid the danger of hitting underground utility wires by calling utility companies 48 hours before digging (in Minnesota call: 1-800-252-1166).

Nestboxes should be opened at least once a week from April 1 through August to remove undesirable tenants, to detect predation or wet nests, to remove the used nest as quickly as possible after fledging, and to keep accurate records on nests, eggs and young. However, the boxes should not be opened between the time the nestlings are 14 days old until after they have left the nestbox.

Unchecked nestboxes harboring house sparrows or wrens will do more to reduce bluebird populations than further them.

Proper placement of nestboxes and careful control of house sparrows and other predators should yield reasonable success with your bluebird trail, and with experience you should be able to send in increasingly enthusiastic reports.

Recommended Bluebird Nestboxes

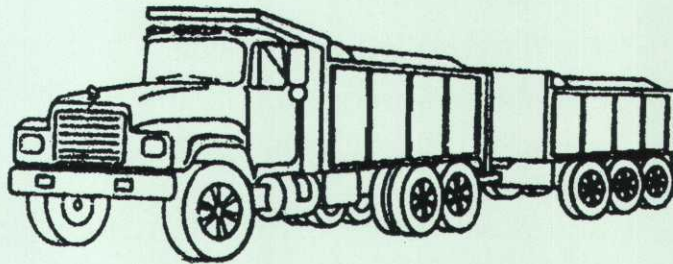
The bluebird recovery program was founded with the introduction of the Peterson nestbox, designed by the late Dick Peterson. The popularity of the Peterson box with its oval hole has spread across the nation. The oval hole provides easier entrance than a round hole. The large overhanging roof gives protection from sun and discourages climbing predators; the drop-down front provides easy access for quick checking, essential cleaning

between nestings, and use of sparrow traps. The narrow sloping floor (which should have no drain holes) helps discourage starlings from nesting, and reduces blowfly larvae. The inner roof and heavy wood construction provides insulation from both heat and cold. (Ventilation holes can be plugged or shuttered for the first nesting and during cold, wet weather.)

Top Ten Tips in Bluebirding

1. Commit to checking the nestboxes at least once a week during the nesting season, keeping written records of the contents. If you can't do this, do not install nestboxes.
2. Select habitat in an open area with low ground cover, at least 200 feet from bushes. A single tree, overhead wires or a fence nearby can be used for a perch.
3. Check area for underground utilities before installing a smooth metal pipe in the ground, with nestbox entrance hole will be no lower than eye level.
4. Use a weather proof box which easily opens from side, top, or front with an entrance hole sized for bluebirds, facing a perch. Never mount on trees or fence lines.
5. Space a single nestbox (or a pair 10-15 feet apart) at 300-500 foot intervals.
6. Allow other native cavity nesters (chicadees, tree swallows, nuthatches) to nest.
7. Never allow house sparrows or starling to nest.
8. Check nestboxes at least weekly until nestlings are

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