

“A Bluebird Monitor's Tale”

by Jeanne Nevard

Henry David Thoreau once said that the bluebird “carries the sky on its back”.

These gentle, stunning creatures, often tagged as “the bluebird of happiness”, were anything but happy back in early to mid 1900's.



Invasive English house sparrows were unfortunately imported in the early 1900's. They aggressively competed with the native bluebird for nesting sites.

A gentleman named Thomas E. Musselman, of Quincy, Illinois began to spread the word about bluebird protection. In 1934, he authored an article for the National Audubon Magazine *Bird-Lore* and urged fellow conservators to establish bluebird box trails throughout the country. He continued with a monthly column aptly entitled “The Bluebird Trail”, to increase the awareness of their plight.

As interest was building for nest box establishment, the baton was passed to Dr. Lawrence Zeleny, who continued writing the column. He also wrote a book, “The Bluebird- How You Can Help Its Fight for Survival”, which fired up interest on a larger scale.

In addition to competitive pressure, the bluebird also faced reduction of their open field habitat due to development, loss of wetlands and cavity providing tree snags, pesticide spraying, and physical attack and eviction from the house sparrow. Their numbers were drastically reduced leaving many to wonder “where have all the bluebirds gone?”

Fast forward to today. The bluebirds are returning with great success with the help of many passionate caretakers who put up and monitor bluebird boxes.

“If you build it they will come” is my motto - as long as the location of the boxes is a fairly open pasture or lawn habitat. Naturally, a chemical-free lawn is a must, as they collect insects from it! Somehow the birds find out and they often do come, to the delight of many who had never seen a bluebird in their neighborhood.

Pairing and establishing a network of multiple boxes is ideal - space permitting. There seems to be a cooperative relationship between tree swallows and bluebirds for protection. At first some territorial squabbles can ensue, but once they bond to their boxes, they get along fine. They benefit from dual protection of the area from the sparrow, as both are great dive bombers.

Another cavity nester is the native house wren. This brings me to why it is so important to monitor the boxes. The wren will fill up many more boxes than she needs with twigs, reducing availability for other birds. It is imperative to watch out for this behavior and observe which box contains her eggs and remove the other twig nests. If no eggs are laid yet, I often just clear out the others and choose the one closest to the woods, which is her preference.

The house sparrow turns out to be the biggest danger to bluebirds in our area and my next point is very critical to the success of attracting your bluebirds and minimizing competitive pressure from house sparrows.



It's one thing to invite the bluebird to live on your property but the key is to provide a safe haven as well.

Eliminating house sparrow nests from your boxes frustrates the sparrows and discourages their attempts to take over bluebird boxes. Once you eliminate the nests, there still is a great risk of bluebird attacks from the house sparrows. Other techniques can be used to control house sparrows. Information on these methods and house sparrow control can be found at <http://www.sialis.org/hosp.htm>.

Bird nests can be identified by the material in the nest:

- Wren: twigs
- Bluebird: pine needles
- Swallow: pine needles, grass usually lined with large white feathers
- House Sparrow: a messy nest of anything including the above!

Another important reason to monitor the bluebird chicks daily is mortality. If there is a dead chick in the nest it needs to be removed. The young birds take about 17 days until they fledge. Closer to that day, just carefully cup your hand over the front of the nest to prevent a premature flight, they usually hunker down when approached. The parents will not abandon their chicks if you do a brief check-in. If the parents are killed or leave, you can foster them in another bluebird nest with chicks of the same age.

For the past 10 years, my husband Ken and I have owned six nest boxes that we have cared for. I have established a trail of about 20 boxes and can boast a healthy population on Mt. Lebanon St. Countless bluebirds have been born to our utter delight!

I provide snacks of live mealworms purchased online or from the Wild Birds store, which really helps pull the young chicks through during the first nesting in the rainy months of May and June or even July. All of our birds have fledged and survived, as far as I know. We are rewarded with hungry and gregarious parents

and chicks which boldly feed six feet away on our deck railing. At the time of this writing last season, our second brood of 3 chicks were about to fledge any day.

Remember, birds do not clean out their boxes after nesting. You must do it to insure the next nesting. Bluebirds often will have two broods. To clean out the box, always wear a dust mask & gloves. Start by simply removing the used nest, brush out the box and spray a weak chorine solution to clean it. I follow it by spraying clear water afterwards. I prop open the front door with a stick & let it dry for a day. It is best done with a stretch of dry weather. Believe me, they are well worth the work.



As I do my outdoor chores of gardening or hanging the wash, my bluebirds always seem to be there with their soft calls, cheery wing waves and their spectacularly handsome color. I have such a soft spot for them. They fill me with awe and respect and they truly are my bluebirds of happiness!

Nest box monitors are needed to check on the boxes at the Heald Orchard. Local residents make the best monitors but others are welcome. Success with bluebirds increases with regular monitoring.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions at Jeanneart55@aol.com

Further information and helpful links:

<http://massbluebird.org/> Massachusetts Bluebird Association

www.nabluebirdsociety.org North American Bluebird Society

<http://watch.birds.cornell.edu/nest/home/index> - The nestbox network

"The Bluebird Monitor's Guide" A Cornell Bird Library Guide by Berger, Kridler & Griggs

"The Bluebird Book" by Donald & Lillian Stokes

The Groton Hardware store carries George Brouillette bluebird boxes. Contact him for house sparrow trap boxes at: gmaoyet@gmail.com

Mealworm suppliers

Worm Man's Worm Warm (www.wormman.com)

Grubco (www.grubco.com)

Wild Birds Store at the Greystone Plaza, Rte. 101A in Amherst, NH