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Wisconsin Bluebird

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BRAW is an affiliate member of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS), founded by Lawrence Zeleny

Bluebird Nestbox Building Blitz!

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Pat Ready

Zach Brocken working the assembly line at the ALAS nestbox blitz.

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Bluebirds Challenge Winter in Wisconsin

By Leif Marking

The Eastern Bluebird traditionally migrates in late fall to southern or gulf coast states to avoid the rigorous winters in the northern states that offer limited food sources and cold temperatures. During the past decade, however, many of the winter seasons have been milder than usual, and some bluebirds have ventured longer prior to migrating. Few were reported to stay all winter.

Despite recent drastically more rugged winter weather, unusual numbers of bluebirds are sighted and recorded in Christmas bird counts in many Wisconsin regions. A number of folks are communicating their sightings, and some are reporting that bluebirds are spending the nights in their empty bluebird nest boxes for protection from the cold. Many others report that bluebirds appear routinely in cold weather at their heated water bath or bird feeders.

Some folks are concerned the bluebirds might starve and they ask what kind of feed and cold protection to offer. My usual response to these inquiries is that bluebirds obviously survived in this country for hundreds of years without handouts of food or heated water in winter, and migration has been mandatory for survival.

So what has changed this past decade that would encourage or allow bluebirds to overwinter in Wisconsin? Certainly the half dozen milder winters were conducive for healthy populations of bird species to expand their winter range. Other factors include the increased interest and awareness of people to commit efforts to helping the birds with new and innovative bird-feeding technologies as promoted commercially by suppliers of bird feed.

Perhaps the most important attraction for keeping bluebirds in the region is the heated water bath, and sales of these have soared dramatically these past few years. Mealworms and other concocted feed items are now available by mail order throughout the year. Winter overnight roost boxes are advertised

to offer the birds protection from cold winter temperatures. Also many bluebird nest boxes are available for overnight roosting.

With the more severe winter conditions of 2007 and again in 2008 the situation has changed markedly. For example La Crosse WI, experienced all-time record snow accumulation in December with frequent below zero temperatures. An ice storm in early January 2009 covered much of the natural food items that bluebirds especially depend on for daily sustenance and survival. On January 8, 2009, the La Crosse Tribune Outdoors Section featured a photo of 10 bluebirds on a snowy, heated water bath, and many other newspapers and magazines were reporting similar sightings.

Many of these bluebirds may perish attempting to survive this year's harsh winter conditions as food sources dwindle. Good nutrition is vital in winter to maintain body temperatures sufficient to avoid hypothermia that often leads to mortality. This is also important to maintain the energy necessary for mobility to avoid predators. Bluebirds that are in poor health perhaps lack the energy and orientation for migration.

One of my bluebird friends has found two dead male bluebirds of the four that had been roosting in the box in her back yard. She had been cleaning and bedding the box routinely to improve their opportunity for survival. She offered them mealworms but they did not consume; their excretions contained various pits from berries. Her evaluation of this precarious situation was that these bluebirds should have migrated, and she would be willing to remove the nest box in winter to prevent another occurrence in the future. Other bluebirds are likely to perish this year in boxes that are not routinely monitored or in natural cavities.

The majority of bluebirds attempting to overwinter and those reported dead are males and most likely juveniles that have not experienced migration. They could be late season-born and did not mature sufficiently to gain the physiological character or incentive that leads them to migrate. Or they may have been born to parents that

successfully negotiated through moderate winters in Wisconsin. However, humans may well influence their migration patterns more in winter by offering desirable food, heated water baths, and nesting boxes for night roosting.

Bird experts maintain that wild birds receive only about 15 percent of their winter diet from bird feeders. They can survive comfortably without handouts. The feeders are actually supplemental. In fact, the greatest numbers of birds in this country live, survive, and thrive in environments that are devoid of handouts. There is good evidence that wild birds could survive without these handouts, but the handouts attract birds to the great pleasure and satisfaction of humans. Bluebirds and other insect-eating birds are not accustomed to feeding on seeds and fruits and do so as a last resort for survival. They are incapable of surviving most northern winters, and that is why they traditionally migrate to warmer climates in the winter.

So is climate change the primary reason for bluebirds to alter their inherited tendencies of migration? Or are human activities and innovations in bird feeding responsible for the bluebirds delaying or refraining from migration? If global warming develops noticeably in our lifetime, we can expect birds to respond accordingly. However, we must be more cautious in our generosity of handouts for bluebirds if we find that we are discouraging migration. I suspect there are many bluebirds in Wisconsin this winter that will perish in this bone-chilling cold. Some birders fear the stage could be set for heavy bluebird mortality.

I have a multitude of winter birds at my feeder constantly devouring sunflower seed in the absence of a heated water bath. We see no bluebirds lingering around the feeder and none are roosting in nearby empty bluebird nest boxes. For the sake of bluebirds, perhaps use of these seemingly harmless heated water baths by well-meaning people deserves further serious consideration.

BPCA Contributes to BRAW

By Leif Marking

The Brice Prairie Conservation Association (BPCA) membership approved a contribution to the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (BRAW) last summer provided the donation was in the form of bluebird boxes that could be marketed by BRAW. The plan was for BRAW to sell the boxes for \$20 each at the Madison Garden Expo in February and other similar events. The proceeds were to be used by the BRAW Top State Project to expand the numbers of bluebird boxes and trails in many Wisconsin counties.

BPCA purchased enough lumber for 100 bluebird boxes, and Fred Craig and I proceeded to build them. Fred and I have our shops equipped with the necessary tools to do this kind of work, and we are the main box builders for BPCA. They are the NABS-style boxes made of cedar lumber that is 7/8 inches thick and smooth on one side for easy cleaning. These boxes were constructed to be convertible to vent or no vent simply by fastening the side panels to the front and back panels with screws that are removable. Once these boxes are sold, BRAW should have \$2,000 to invest in the Top State Project.

In November Kent Hall contacted

Leif Marking inspects the nest boxes built for use by BRAW for the Operation Top State effort.



BPCA to find out if we could construct 250 or so boxes for his Top State Program needs this spring. Kent is the driving force in the effort that has already resulted in recruitment of many new members and monitors and a dramatic increase in the production of bluebirds. Since the need was so voluminous, Kent suggested we cut the costs by using standard pine boards rather than the more expensive cedar. This resulted in material costs of less than half the cost of cedar material. Fred and I purchased the pine lumber on sale at Menards and proceeded to construct NABS-style bluebird boxes. To save on lumber we eliminated the lower extension on the back panel since that portion is not necessary with the new mounting systems. Despite Parkinson's disease and knee problems, I can work a couple hours before a rest, and with that meager effort I constructed 12 to 15 boxes a day. But big jobs can be accomplished a little at a time! Together we constructed 276 boxes in November. They are available for the returning bluebirds in spring.

These pine boxes are very serviceable and functional, however they may not last quite as long as cedar boxes. The cedar boxes, of thicker lumber, offer better insulation against cold in spring and heat in summer, but box temperature is often not an issue in Wisconsin. The bluebirds will treasure them!

ALAS Box Building Blitz!

In August the Aldo Leopold Audubon Society (ALAS) of Stevens Pt. held a box building workshop and built over 500 NABS Style boxes for BRAW. The event was organized by Kent Hall. *Pat Ready photos*



Joe Schultz adding the finishing touch.



Kent Hall secures boxes.



The Big Blue Egg

By Leif Marking

Jim Solberg, a news reporter, requested to come along with me on one of my monitoring trips to learn a little bit more about bluebirds, monitoring, and other birds that use our nest boxes. We started to check boxes near West Salem WI, and found and recorded five beautiful bluebird eggs in each of the first two boxes, which was very exciting for Jim.

I knew the next box had seven chickadee eggs on my last check, so when Jim inspected the nest he reported a complete hatch. The adult birds perched in a small apple tree nearby scolding us as we removed the nest so Jim could take some photos of the maggot-sized newborns. We replaced the nest, and the parents returned to the box before we left the scene.

I gathered that Jim was intrigued with this monitoring activity so I asked him to check the next box so I could stay in the vehicle and save my energy. As he returned, he reported six bluebird eggs. However one was extra large like it had a double yoke. I

quizzed him on how large. His description suggested it was too large for a bluebird egg. Then I had to go check for myself. I had already informed him that our 1 3/8 inch-wide oval entry restricted starlings, blue jays, and most cowbirds. My observation was the large blue egg was that of a starling, although the blue color was amazingly similar to the bluebird's eggs. But Jim was leery about that idea because our restricted entry size prevents them from getting in. I explained that I had removed starling eggs and nest material recently from a wood duck box on a nearby pond, and this large blue egg was identical to those I removed. So how did the starling get into the bluebird box?

Then I noticed a woodpecker, who apparently preferred round holes to oval ones, had attacked the entry hole. The hole was nearly 2 inches wide in this one-year-old cedar NABS-style house. Apparently the starling was egg bound and had to relieve herself in the nearest safe cavity. I was so thrilled to observe that the starling had not harmed the bluebird eggs. This incident exemplified to me the kindness of mother birds to other bird's reproduction.



I was concerned that a starling might return and destroy the bluebird eggs so after our monitoring trip I returned to the scene with a new substitute box. The female bluebird left the box and watched from a nearby corn stalk as I placed the nest with six eggs in the newly mounted box. As I prepared to leave with the old box in my car the female anxiously entered her new home. I took the old box home, replaced the entry panel, and returned to the scene.

Once again the female watched as I replaced the original box, placed the nest inside, removed the starling egg, and watched from a little distance as she reclaimed her home. Bluebirds are so charming when you invade their territory that one must think they comprehend that you are helping them. So how did this pair of bluebirds show their appreciation? Well, all of the eggs hatched, and all the nestlings fledged. I can share another intimate experience with bluebirds.



Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin

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boxes ready.**

