

THE EASTERN BLUEBIRD: A DECADE OF RESTORATION

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Although the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), never quite made the endangered species list, it declined as much as 90% over much of its breeding range during this century and for this reason it has been and remains a species of special concern. Loss of habitat, and other detrimental actions by man such as the use of DDT and introduction of the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), have been primarily responsible for the marked decline of the bluebird population.

An aggressive nest box program for this cavity nesting species has proven to be the single most important effort towards restoring the bluebird to its former numbers. Competition from House Sparrows and loss of suitable habitat, however, continue to adversely affect the bluebird's recovery in heavily urbanized areas.

Over the past ten years, I have maintained a "bluebird trail" in Jefferson and Shelby Counties, adjacent to the City of Birmingham, AL. The trail, which started in 1977 with seven dozen boxes brought down from Illinois, has expanded to as many as 160 boxes to meet the need of a growing population of Eastern Bluebirds.

The boxes were placed in suitable locations during the winter months and were monitored every seven to ten days from late March through August. Accurate records have been maintained for each box, and a summary of the data sent each year to the Department of Conservation Non-Game Wildlife Program in Montgomery, AL, and the North American Bluebird Society in Silver Spring, MD, as well as to other interested parties.

Over the ten year period from 1977-1987 more than 2200 bluebirds have been successfully fledged. In 1987, 363 young fledged from 152 boxes. Nine of the 152 boxes were utilized by other species, including five Carolina Chickadees (*Parus carolinensis*), two Tufted Titmice (*Parus bicolor*), and two White-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta carolinensis*). Four boxes were taken over by House Sparrows, and their nests and eggs promptly removed and the boxes relocated. The principal competition for the boxes continues to be flying squirrels (*Glaucomys volans*) which occupied 51 or about 33% of the total!

In recent years special consideration has been given to placing boxes in Jefferson County where the decline in the bluebird population has

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been most noticeable. In at least two such locations this year, fledglings were produced successfully for the first time in 15 years!

An interesting feature of the bluebird trail has been the banding of the nestlings (and some adults) during the past five years. The 237 bluebirds banded in 1987 brought the total banded to date to 1215. Those individuals responsible for placing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services's bands on the bluebirds were "Buss" Peavy initially, then Tom Imhof and finally, this year by John and Harriet Wright Findley. It is interesting to note that of the thousands of birds banded by these Federal Banding permit holders, none of them had ever banded bluebirds before doing so on this trail!

Virtually all bluebird bandings have been of nestlings ten to 14 days old while still in the nest. Some incubating adult females have also been successfully banded as well as protected non-bluebird species' young found using the nest boxes.

A noted biologist and author, and friend of many of us, Chandler Robbins, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service once said, "There is not much that ordinary citizens can do to save the Bald Eagle, the Loggerhead Shrike, or the Whooping Crane, but they can help save the Bluebird."

Providing properly placed nest boxes for our Eastern Bluebird has proven to be a tremendous step in the right direction for the restoration of this beautiful and desirable species. If we cooperate in this effort, and motivate others to help, we will indeed have renewed hope for its future.

