



Jan. - Feb.

A Bird Bander's Diary

by

Ralph K. Bell

Jan. 27, 1967 ... Temperature 49 degrees at daybreak. We had a rain last night and as the sun came out early this morning at least three of our wintering Bluebirds were calling at nearby boxes. The Horned Larks were giving their mating calls as they flew high over the pasture fields and a Robin kept repeating "teaspoon", "teaspoon". It sounded like spring and gave me notice that it was time to get some more Bluebird boxes out. Boxes should be put up in March if possible, although I had at least two boxes used last year that were put up during the last week in April. All boxes put up in May attracted only House Wrens and House Sparrows. Fall erection is probably the best. Bluebirds like to check over all possible nesting sites in the fall.

Feb. 14 ... Several Bluebird boxes were put out today along roads travelled while delivering eggs to stores. I want to have at least 150 boxes on poles or posts before the first of March. My friend Wesley Knisley now makes most of my boxes. By using a few ideas of our own along with information generously supplied by Bill Highhouse of Warren, Pa. and EBBA member Don Varner of Morrisonville, Illinois, we have had wonderful success with our Bluebird nest box routes (in operation for 2 years now).

Bill Highhouse has been very successful for the past 10 years with the conventional box (5" x 5" x 10" high with 1½" entrance hole - see Charles Neel's article in the March-April 1965 issue of EBBA News) but the Bluebirds in this area seem to prefer Don Varner's smaller box with inside dimensions of 3½" x 3½" x 7". Example: a 5"x5" box (that hadn't been successful, and we knew the Bluebirds knew it was there) was replaced with the smaller box on May 29, 1965. This new box contained five Bluebird eggs when checked ten days later. As an experiment, I placed one of each size just three feet apart in an old orchard. The smaller box was chosen, and I could give many more examples. Also, House Sparrows do not like the smaller size very well as they like to put in lots of nesting material.

If predatory animals are a problem (raccoons, cats, etc.) an aluminum roof is preferred; otherwise regular felt roofing will do. We use a removable top for easy cleaning, but it should be fastened securely. No

drainage holes are necessary and the top should fit snugly...Bluebirds like darkness. Do not use a perch - this only invites House Wrens and English Sparrows.

Boxes placed in open farm country are preferred (where there are only a few scattered trees. Edges of pasture land and old orchards are perhaps the best locations. Cemeteries are also fine if sprays are not used. Do not put boxes near sprayed gardens or orchards. Keep boxes a quarter mile from buildings where English Sparrows are found. Boxes near woods attract House Wrens - the destroyer of many Bluebird eggs. We much prefer to place boxes on telephone or electric poles as this practically eliminates depredation by snakes and small animals. Use a wire that goes through holes in the back of the box, to hold the box on a pole. Utility companies usually do not want any nails in their poles. The tension caused by the weight of the box prevents slipping of the wire. Also, the box can be raised or lowered with ease. Place the box approximately four feet above the ground as this low height helps discourage English Sparrows. If no utility company poles are handy, fence posts are our second choice, with trees a poor third choice.

Place the box so that the entrance hole is away from the road, or a car may eventually hit a Bluebird leaving the box. Always face the box toward open land. Keep weeds and bushes away from boxes. I personally like boxes on the east side of a pole or post. It gets the sun on a cold spring morning and is the coolest place on a hot summer afternoon. If



Winter scene showing typical Bluebird habitat in Greene County, Pa.

boxes are to be regularly checked by car, pick locations where the car can be completely pulled off the road or you may be hit by another car or arrested sometime.

If possible it is best to check boxes every two weeks during the nesting season - to remove any possible English Sparrow or House Wren nests and both can be very persistent. I leave any House Wren nest alone if it already contains eggs. A friend of mine removed a House Wren egg from a nest in a Bluebird box every day for 25 days before she finally gave up. I feel the House Wren is responsible for the disappearance of the Bewick's Wren in this area. At present the House Wren doesn't need to be encouraged here. It has adapted itself to town conditions - and seems to be doing quite well - while the Bewick's Wren and the Bluebird are more selective in their habitats.

To control Screwworm larvae, one of the worst enemies of Bluebirds in some areas, dust the Bluebird eggs with a cat and dog flea powder. Be sure it says "safe for cats". Cats lick themselves - dogs generally do not. Screwworm larvae can also be kept in check by cleaning the house after each brood, but this is not absolutely necessary if dusting is practiced. If tragedy has struck a first nesting attempt, the box should be cleaned of all nesting material, otherwise a second nesting attempt will probably not take place.

In this area, Bluebirds seem to prefer the open hilltops first and the bottomlands last, but we have some nesting at all levels. Boxes should always be at least 200 yards apart. Bluebirds are very anti-social toward their own species during the nesting season. A dark colored box is preferred. We now use a walnut stain on many boxes. It usually takes two years before Bluebirds will accept a white box. Some female Bluebirds will stay on the nest when the box is opened and they can be banded with no nest desertion. If the mate is not around to cause a fuss, the female can usually be banded and put back on the nest. Once I reached under a female, took out a nestling, banded it, and put it back, but she did not object when I reached under her for a second nestling.

Permission of farm owners should be asked, for placing boxes, and utility companies if possible. Many farmers are very cooperative and will watch that no one molests the boxes. Some wonderful friendships can be made this way. We put our names and addresses, on an aluminum plate, on each box. This helps to prevent theft; however, I have recently learned that one of my boxes was "borrowed" and is now on a farm near Monkton, Md. Each box is numbered and records are kept in a book. If the numerals are large, the book can be referred to when one is driving along a road, to see if the box needs to be checked.

The 1966 results of the Bluebird nest box route are given on the following page. The figures do not include those of Wesley Knisley (who makes

our boxes). Wes has a sub-permit and banded 159 young Bluebirds in 41 boxes on his own route.



Bluebird box fastened on pole (with wire).

Total boxes checked	130
Boxes in which Bluebirds attempted to nest	91
* Boxes used for second nesting attempt	29
Total eggs laid	516
Total eggs hatched	422
Number of young which apparently left the boxes safely	377
Additional young which may have left the boxes safely	30
Number of nests in which young were banded	80
Number of young banded	334

English Sparrows attempted to build 36 nests in 32 boxes; House Wrens attempted to build 32 nests in 24 boxes.

*The low number of second nesting attempts can probably be attributed to a late spring (we had snow in May) and to a very hot and dry summer.

In addition to the above, a Carolina Chickadee successfully raised a brood in one box.

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Having problems? With nets? . . . or with record keeping?
 . . . or with anything else? Maybe there's a solution at the meeting.



Everybody's coming to EBBA's Annual Meeting ... YOU be sure to come, too!