

# A Bird Bander's Diary

## By Ralph K. Bell



September 4, 1971.....Our last nestling Bluebirds left the box in the yard today. Past performance indicates these young birds will feed with their parents around the local area for some time to come but will come back each evening and spend the night in the Sycamore tree that is only a few feet from the nest box. The young soon learn to come to the roost tree without their parents and the pre-roosting ritual often lasts an hour and more. They

will inspect numerous possible roosting places on the outer lower branches of the tree and never more than 8 feet from the ground.

About the time I think the young Bluebirds have settled for the night, they will fly down on the nearby wire fence and sometimes will even leave the area for a few minutes. But soon they will be back and the roost hunting ritual starts over again. Once roosts are decided upon, the young Bluebirds will eventually roost in the same spot each night even if a lot of other places have been examined. I often check then at night with a flashlight and sometimes two will roost together - snuggled up close and always under a big leaf. Probably one of the main reasons they like this tree so much is because of the large leaves and low branches as both are a protection against Screech Owls.

I think most of us consider the Bluebird a gentle, retiring bird. This is not necessarily the correct image. Many species of birds are more aggressive when they have others to "back them up" (this also applies to humans and to other animals as well). I am going to relate an account, word for word, of the actions of Bluebirds when they were much more common than now.

Since the Bluebird is a favorite of many people (and it is my favorite bird also), I have hesitated to publish this but I feel we can all be better birders if we understand bird behavior as it actually is and not as we fancy it or want it to be. The following account was written by J. Warren Jacobs of nearby Waynesburg, Pennsylvania; it was published on February 1, 1904, in "The Monthly Bulletin of the Division of Zoology" - Volume 1, No. 10, issued by the Pennsylvania State Board of Agriculture, Harrisburg, Pa. Mr. Jacobs' son, Bryan, told me this summer that I could publish anything his father had written and I think you will find the following quite interesting.

Bird Bander's Diary - continued

## NOTES ON THE PURPLE MARTIN AND BIRD HOUSES FOR ITS SUMMER HOME

By: J. W. Jacobs

"Away back in the seventies when we first came to Waynesburg, my father erected a bird house of 16 rooms for the use of the Martins. At that time the English Sparrow was not known in this section and its depredations, therefore, were not thought of. However, another bird, one of beauty and courage, was already upon the scene and claimed nativity as his right to pre-empt the home of the Martins. This was the Bluebird with his uniform of deep blue coat and reddish pantaloons. There was no compromise on his part; he wanted the whole box for his single nest. Selfish, stubborn and stingy, he would drive away half a dozen of his own kind after they had assisted in breaking the Martin's eggs, or in killing the young. At first my father had my older brothers shoot some of these birds, but it seems another was always ready to take the place of the one killed.

Disparing of reducing the number of Bluebirds, my father ordered the shooting stopped. My brothers then caught the Bluebirds and pulled out the tail feathers, and thereafter whenever we saw a 'bobtailed' Bluebird in our part of town we knew it was one that had visited our Martin House. Three years were spent in an effort to establish the Martins, but each spring the Bluebirds annoyed them so much that the Martins left. Finally my father took the box down.

Nearly 20 years elapsed before I decided to try my luck in establishing a colony of these birds. During this time great changes were taking place about our premises. The town which had been some blocks to the north of us, spread out until it encroached upon us and enveloped our property with the busy noisy surroundings, and passing on, crossed the creek south of us and filled a part of a small valley with dwellings and steam works. The Bluebird became scarce in 1895, a March blizzard almost annihilated it. Ex-Sheriff Cosgray had about the time my father took down his Martin house, brought four of these unruly, selfish feathered foreigners - the English Sparrow - from New York City and turned them loose in the town, where in a very few years they increased into thousands.

At last, in the spring of 1896, I decided to erect a box for the Martins and at the same time oust the Sparrows which nested about our buildings which might drive away the former. The bird-house, in which was laid the foundation for a large colony of Martins, was a four gabled structure of 20 rooms, a central cupola on top and a chimney on each gable. It was erected 13 feet high, about 80 feet south of where my father's box had stood years before. Eleven young birds were reared in this box that year, and in the third year another house was erected to meet the demand for nesting room and the next year still another box was put up making a total of 99 rooms, and the colony continued to increase. A happy result since that year is that there is an annual overflow of birds from my colony which go elsewhere to nest.

To secure a good colony of Martins it is necessary to guard against certain enemies, chief among which, at the present day, is the English Sparrow. Another enemy of the Martin is the domestic cat. Watch her, for when the male Martins get to fighting they nearly always fall to the ground where "tabby" is lying in wait." (To be continued in February 1972 issue).

--R.D. 1, Box 229, Clarksville, Pa. 15322