

## **YOU SAY YOU DON'T HAVE PREDATORS? MAYBE NOT TODAY BUT WHAT ABOUT TOMORROW? ~ by Allen Jackson**

In this day of an educated public, I find it amazing how many people still mount their bluebird boxes on wooden posts, telephone poles or trees, setting the stage for encounters with ground predators. If I had a nickel for every time I heard "We don't have predators here"... Predator issues are usually infrequent but certainly not uncommon. A swift response is needed to prevent continued predation, but an ounce of prevention can virtually eliminate predator issues.

Rat snakes and raccoons are two prevalent ground predators in NJ. Both are active at night and are very efficient hunters. Landlords have a responsibility to prevent unnecessary bluebird loss. The accompanying two incidents are followed by a suggestion how to make an effective predator guard.



*(snake photos by Pete Bozak)*

### **SNAKE INCIDENT**

I wanted to share these pictures with the readers, hoping it will encourage everyone to make sure predator guards are on every box. The two dramatic pictures show a large rat snake that found easy access to a bluebird box mounted on a wooden post. The box was actually being used to trap house sparrows but a pair of bluebirds commandeered the box. There are 4 other bluebird boxes on the property with predator guards that are the primary bluebird producers. I do not want to deal with a snake of this size. What would you do? Don't be caught having to deal with a snake the size of the one pictured. Snakes can have attitudes. They bite, poop on you (the smell is worse than horrible), and may likely cause nightmares.

### **RACCOON PREDATION INCIDENT**

Raccoons also create problems for bluebirds. In early July, I conducted a site visit that had 4 boxes. The landlord stated he had lost all 25 bluebird eggs in 2020, not a single bluebird hatched. All 4 boxes were mounted on wooden posts and had some sticky "Tanglefoot" on the post to ward off predators (not effective). Each post and box had claw marks from raccoons. Claw marks are easy to spot if one simply looks for them. I erected 2 boxes with predator guards and asked the landlord to remove his boxes. He has good habitat that I expect will host 2 pair of bluebirds next season - successfully of course. Update: A pair of bluebirds nested in the new box within the month. Three eggs were laid.



*(photo on right by Karen Legg; photos of nest box setup on next page by Allen Jackson)*



**MY PREDATOR GUARD PREFERENCE** - It should go without saying that each and every bluebird setup should have a predator guard. Installing predator guards is not hard. I have reverted to using the best protection I can muster. While there are a number of types of guards, the one pictured has been extremely successful for me.

The materials include: a 6' heavy duty T-post, a 48" long piece of 4" PVC sewer pipe (from Lowes), a 4" end cap drilled with a 7/8" hole, a 1/2" x 8" galvanized threaded pipe held on the T-post by 2 hose clamps (size 3/4" to 1 3/4"). I screw a 1/2" threaded galvanized flange to the bottom of the bluebird box and simply screw the box onto the mounting pole after the post and guard are ready. This requires little maintenance other than occasional steel wooling of the PVC pipe, followed by some Turtle wax to keep it smooth. The 48" length and the fact that it wobbles on the post make it hard for predators to climb. Personal experience and recommendations from the Purple Martin Conservation Association indicate that a 4' rat snake can extend out 3' to get by cone guards, so consider not using cone guards if you have rat snakes. However, a rat snake can not go up 3' if there is nothing for it to cling to (like screws that hold metal guards together). Most metal guards are only 2' long which snakes have gotten by too many times on purple martin setups I have monitored.

My setup is somewhat costly (~\$35) but well worth the effort to make the box safe and should not be a concern for most people that host a bluebird box in their yard. Bluebirds have many factors to overcome for a successful nesting. Protecting them from predators is a simple step to keep your bluebirds around and productive. Needing multiple boxes for a trail adds to the cost but there are ways to reduce things. I purchase Atlantic white cedar from a local saw mill, deliver the lumber and hardware to a school wood shop class that build 150 boxes per school year, and receive financial assistance from local environmental groups. Partnerships are a great way to go.

Common sense tells you it is better to be proactive and prevent the problem than to suffer the consequences.