

Commonsense Bluebird Management

Allen Jackson

Most people know me for my work with Purple Martins, a highly successful management program that martins thrive on in New Jersey. That management program is nothing more than following the Purple Martin Conservation Association's recommendations at the highest level. Basically, it involves placing the right house (usually Supergourds with starling-resistant entrance holes) in the proper location, protecting them from predators and nest competitors, and checking nests to document the results. A core group of dedicated mentors advocate proper management to landlords in their respective areas. We used banding their birds as an incentive to manage properly. As landlords throughout New Jersey bought into the program, the martin population mushroomed allowing us to routinely band 8,000 martins annually.

Martin colonies are located in areas that offer good habitat for bluebirds. I noticed that most bluebird houses were not sited properly, offered little protection from predators, were not maintained or managed, and few houses met the design standards established by NABS. Bluebird management has to be a mindset—it's no different than gardening. One doesn't plant a seed in the ground and return in the fall expecting a bountiful harvest. Good soil, sun, fertilizer, water, and weeding are all important. The better gardener you are the better the harvest. Proper management of bluebirds may be the key to having them around for future generations to enjoy.

Ask yourself, are you really benefitting bluebirds? If you truly want to help bluebirds, concentrate on establishing bluebird trails. One person knowledgeable in proper management can make a significant difference. That is not to say that backyard bluebirders are not important—their success only adds to the formula. I like to refer to establishing trails as getting the biggest bang for the buck. Simply put, it is easier to train one person to monitor a 50-box bluebird trail than it is to train 50 people to monitor boxes in 50 backyards.

A bluebird trail can be any size, from a few boxes to however many a person wants to manage. I personally manage a trail of about 50 boxes, which I monitor on a weekly

basis from April through August. Start out with fewer boxes and add more as your bluebird population increases. While I generally plan on one pair of bluebirds per three acres as the carrying capacity, I try to start out with fewer boxes. Placing an abundance of boxes only attracts nest competitors that will out-compete or adversely effect your bluebirds. You are also habituating those species to nesting in your bluebird boxes.

SET UP

The setup I prefer is a NABS-style box with specific hardware that allows me to relocate my boxes easily and with little effort. The photo below shows all the parts and the photo on the next page shows the setup installed. It is costly, about \$45 per setup, but I can unscrew the box, remove the predator guard, pull the post and relocate as necessary. It is durable and extremely user friendly. More importantly, the predator guard wobbles preventing raccoons or snakes from climbing it. Waxing the predator guard periodically keeps it slippery. I've never had a predator climb this setup. I also use a NABS-style box mounted on 3/4-inch conduit pipe but am not totally convinced this is predator proof.

SITE SELECTION

Location, location, location is the key to box placement. I look for open habitat with an overhanging branch nearby for the male to use for perching, hunting, and defending his territory. Bluebirds especially like agricultural areas where



it's easier to find food. The box is faced to the east to catch the warmth of the morning sun and I look for structure within 100 feet for the young's first flight. Providing shade in the afternoon cools the box during the heat of the summer. I do not pair boxes as research by the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (www.braw.org) found pairing led to an increase in Tree Swallow numbers associated with a decrease in bluebird numbers. I had observed decreases in bluebird numbers at three sites where I paired boxes. There are many different opinions on how to manage bluebirds and pairing boxes is one of the more controversial. Wisconsin fledged over 35,500 bluebirds in 2012—no other bluebird chapter comes close to that production. I encourage adoption of BRAW's management recommendations, developed through objective research.

MONITORING AND DEALING WITH NEST COMPETITORS

Conducting weekly nest checks is the single most important management practice. Observe, document, and let the results dictate how you manage. Most management will involve dealing with nest competitors. My most frequent problem species are House Sparrows, House Wrens, and Tree Swallows.

House Sparrows are not native to North America and must be controlled. I do not place boxes within 400 feet of livestock farms and work diligently at controlling House Sparrows by trapping and shooting. Occasionally I replace my NABS box with a slotted box, a style less preferable to sparrows.

House Wrens can be a huge problem and are considered by many as predators of bluebirds. They will dominate a box within their territory, many times destroying bluebird eggs before taking over the nest. Finding bluebird eggs on the ground in front of the box is indicative of House Wrens. House Wrens are a native species, protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The best way to deal with them is to move the box farther into the open away from their preferred habitat, which is forested/shrubby areas.

Without a doubt, Tree Swallows are my biggest headache. New Jersey has abundant wetland habitat and high numbers of Tree Swallows. I have documentation of four Tree Swallows

ganging up on a male bluebird, taking him to the ground, attacking and driving him off before they drove the female away, destroyed the bluebird eggs, and built their nest on top of the bluebird nest.

I receive criticism when I refer to Tree Swallows as pugnacious, but make no mistake about it, they are a problem species to bluebirds. I've found dead bluebirds in a box under a Tree Swallow nest and many times have witnessed Tree Swallows driving bluebirds away from a box. Don't get me wrong, I like Tree Swallows. I also like fox and chickens, but I do not put the two together. Try to select optimal bluebird habitat, do not pair boxes, and experiment with ways to deter Tree Swallows from using bluebird boxes. I am evaluating placing 2 x 3 inch wire around the box and placing boxes near trees in open areas, hoping to find that Tree Swallows dislike not being able to fly directly to the entrance hole or that they may avoid boxes placed near trees for fear of proximity to aerial predators.

Ken Glaspey and Ed Sheppard are helping define optimal habitat while dealing with nest competitors. They manage a 59-box trail in Greenwich, a rural agricultural area in southern New Jersey. Twenty-nine of those boxes are located on three large commercial nursery farms with plantings consisting of shrubbery and flowering trees. The nursery stock produces flowers and berries, attracting insects and providing a late season food source for birds. A drip irrigation system keeps the soil moist during the summer drought, also attracting bugs. Their boxes are placed ~ 200 yards apart out of sight of each other, helping reduce nest competitors. Those 29 boxes fledged 6.66 young per box in 2012! It doesn't get any better.



SUMMARY OF 2012

In 2011, four dedicated people decided to establish the New Jersey Bluebird Society (www.njbbs.org). We are gradually making progress restoring bluebirds to more sustainable numbers. Some of the accomplishments for 2012 are listed below for my area, southern New Jersey. The results show the impact one person can generate.

Accomplishments:

- Fledged over 1,150 bluebirds in southern New Jersey in about 400 boxes.
- Banded 1,026 bluebirds (551 myself, 326 by Ken Glaspey/Ed Sheppard).
- Partnered with a sawmill, commercial nursery, and woodshop class to build 60 boxes out of Atlantic white cedar.
- Purchased an additional 50 western red cedar boxes (all 110 were erected during the season).
- Coordinated 12 existing trails.
- Established 14 new trails (3 to 25 boxes) with 13 new monitors (a 25-box trail fledged 3/box, another 13-box trail fledged 4.2/box).
- Averaged 4 young fledged per box on my trail.
- Erected single boxes at ~20 backyard sites.
- Developed informal partnerships with US Fish & Wildlife Service and New Jersey Department of Fish & Wildlife.
- Gave six presentations to the public.
- Designed and coordinated a college student's special project about management.

Plans for 2013 include:

- Modifying and expanding existing trails.
- Establishing about eight new trails with monitors.
- Establishing a bluebird trail for special-needs children.
- Making seven presentations.
- Renewing partnership to build more boxes.
- Erecting 150 new boxes.

The program is successful because a core group of people believe in this management style. They see the results and know they are making a significant difference in their areas. Bluebirds thrive on active management; manage them that way.

Allen Jackson is a wildlife biologist retired from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. He is the vice president of the New Jersey Bluebird Society and a member of both NABS and the Bluebird

Restoration Association of Wisconsin. He is a longtime member and activist in the Purple Martin Conservation Association, receiving their 2002 Landlord of the Year Award for his work with Purple Martins.



Chickadees Raise Bluebirds in Mixed-Species Nest

The article about Tree Swallows raising an Eastern Bluebird in the last issue of *Bluebird* (Winter 2012–13, page 17) prompted Chuck Musser to send in some photos and a video of a mixed-species nest that he found in 2002. Chuck says: "I had found two bluebird eggs in the box and about a week later I came back and there were five chickadee eggs and the chickadee took over. The chickadee hatched all of the eggs and fledged all of the young. The photo of the eggs was taken by a fellow bluebirder, Susan Renkel who came to see them. I do some research for the Bluebird Society of Pennsylvania and I found this nest in May of 2002 in one of my bird boxes that I had up at our local retirement home in Elizabethtown, PA. I don't have written down the exact date I found the eggs but I know that they hatched on May 18, 2002."

