

If You Build It They Will Adapt

John Layton

During the early years of the 2000s, the township where I live (Egg Harbor Township in southern New Jersey) was hit with a major housing boom. This boom was manifested in more than 45 housing projects. When each project is completed at least one storm-water retention basin is mandatory. The basins must be fenced and must be completely drained within four days after the end of any storm.

After contacting the Atlantic Audubon Society and finding that I was a member with a successful 62-box bluebird trail, the Township Environmental and Beautification Committee asked me if I thought it would be feasible to install nestboxes at the retention basins. After inspecting the basins I had my doubts given the suburban setting, but I decided to give it a try.

My first year I built and installed nestboxes at nine locations. In three weeks, six boxes were occupied and bluebirds were busy building nests. That year 36 chicks were banded and fledged. So much for me being skeptical!



One of the nestboxes adjacent to a storm-water retention basin (the area beyond the fence).

In the following years I built both Peterson and NABS-style boxes and fastened them to 3/4-inch electrical conduit. I installed boxes, moved boxes, trapped House Sparrows, and worked through other trials and errors. I settled on a 28-box trail.

Most of the boxes in the trail are close to sidewalks (12–15 feet away) and are surrounded by houses, which made my main concern vandalism. So on each box I wrote my name and phone number.



Many of the nestboxes are close to sidewalks and streets, yet the bluebirds don't seem to mind. The storm-water retention basin is to the left, outside the frame of this photo.

As I monitored the boxes people from the neighborhood would come up to me to ask questions, so I would explain about bluebirds and monitoring. I would open the boxes and show all stages of nesting, from nest starts to banding and fledging. The people really took to this method and frequently will call me whenever they see anything questionable.

I call them my "neighborhood watch committee."

Over the past four years the trail has been very successful with an average of 116 chicks, banded and fledged, plus other cavity nesters each year.

So I say, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

John Layton is a founder of the New Jersey Bluebird Society and currently serves as their treasurer. He is also a member of NABS (15 years), the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, and the Atlantic Audubon Society. In addition to the 28-box trail mentioned in this article, John manages a 90-box trail. Since he started monitoring and banding he has fledged more than 2,000 bluebird chicks.

