



# Bluebird News



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Chair: Lance Krog  
Editor: Lance Krog  
Editorial Staff:  
Mike Sandberg

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### *Thank you for remembering.*

*I would like to thank all the wonderful people who remembered our family upon the passing of my brother Jack Ruths in February. Jack and I were close and he was my only sibling so it's been really hard for me. Jack had cancer for the last few years and was so courageous and never complained. He was the greatest. To all of you who called, e-mailed, wrote, came up to me at the Conference and gave your condolences and hugs I can't tell how much it meant to me.*

*Jenean Mortenson*

## Message to Our Members from Lance Krog, Chairman

### The Heat Is On

Welcome to the summer edition of Bluebird News everyone. Summer heat is definitely upon us here in Minnesota. It seems like only yesterday we were complaining about the cold and looking forward to spring and the return of our beloved bluebirds and now here it is the end of the season already! It certainly has been an interesting year and based upon reports received from bluebirders across the state the overwhelming news is that bluebird numbers appear to be down this year. While some monitors are reporting strong numbers or even increases, the majority of reports indicate that the number of nesting bluebird pairs in general is down, the number of eggs per clutch is slightly lower than normal with many nests containing only 3

eggs, and second nesting is not taking place at the rate we would normally expect. So if your trail is down from last year, you are definitely not alone.

My own trail has been both disappointing and encouraging this season. Last fall I decided to take a good hard look at the number of bluebirds fledged per location and the percentage of boxes which had not been occupied by bluebirds. In some locations the occupancy percentage was very high but in others, I had to admit there were just too many boxes that hadn't been occupied for several years and a number of them were removed. Consequently, the percentage of boxes occupied by bluebirds on my trail is up this year. As a result, it's a lot more fun to check the trail when a higher percentage of boxes have bluebirds in them. But on the down

side, many of the second nests only contain 3-4 eggs instead of 4-5 and quite a few pairs have not second nested. Last year one pair nested three times and fledged 6, 6, and 5 for a total of 17 from one location! This year that same location produced 4 I suppose it's possible that this pair will nest again, but it's getting late enough in the season that I won't be holding my breathe.

In 2007 bluebirds again nested in record numbers in Minnesota with 16,501 fledglings reported. All of you did an outstanding job monitoring your trails and submitting annual reports and your dedication was truly appreciated. While the population is still strong, we will be hard pressed to reach these numbers again in 2008 unless we receive a very high number of reports this year or second  
*(Continued on Page 2)*

## Message to Our Members

(Continued from Page 1)

and third nestings increase between now and the end of the season. So the heat is on everyone and this year your annual reports will be extremely important so that we can determine just how strong the overall population is.

We have enclosed a copy of the annual report form already in this edition. If you have friends, relatives, or neighbors who are successfully raising bluebirds but may not be BBRP members, please encourage them to submit a report this year.

All of you make BBRP possible. Networking and word of mouth is still the best way to help a friend get started or have more success with bluebirds. Best wishes to all of you for continued success on your trail this season and thanks for your ongoing support and dedication to bluebird conservation.

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### Keeping Bluebirds Safe

This year we are beginning a new program in Minnesota called "Keeping Bluebirds ." What it involves is fixing mistakes made by ill-informed or uninformed birders who put up houses in dangerous habitat, are on in-appropriate posts, or are in some other way unsafe for Bluebirds. The MN BBRP has decided to make this program a top priority. This program, led by Lance Krog, Keith Radel, Loren Murphy and Carrol Johnson is our attempt to correct past mistakes and ensure the safest nesting possible for cavity nesting species.

#### What to do:

1. Get permission to take down 10 nest boxes that are inappropriate for bluebirds, For example, boxes that are poorly placed too close to trees or brush or in wetlands or too close to livestock areas. Another example would be boxes mounted on trees, wooden posts, or T-posts. Yest another would be boxes you know to be unattended.
2. Work with local groups such as 4-H, scouts, sportsman's clubs, senior citizens, etc. that make boxes and keep them on the right track with regard to construction, mounting, and placement.

Many youth groups in particular are very gung-ho to begin and then interest fades as weekly checking time approaches. Convince these groups to donate boxes to a program that is committed to weekly checking, or have them build feeders instead of nesting boxes. There is very little that is more dangerous to the Bluebird population than an inviting next box that becomes a death trap for the eggs, young, or adult due to predation, wetness, or disease. Without the checking piece, there is no way to intervene if necessary.

***What can you do to earn this stunning patch from BBRP?  
Simple! Just follow steps 1 or 2 above, and fill out the simple  
form at the bottom of this page. Send it to our PO Box and  
you will earn your safe Bluebirds patch for 2008!***



#### 2008 KEEP BLUEBIRDS SAFE PROGRAM

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Location, Area where you improved Bluebird habitat:

Briefly, explain what you did to keep Bluebirds safe:

Clip and Mail to BBRP, PO Box 984, Faribault, MN 55021

## UNATTENDED AND UNMONITORED BOXES ARE A DANGER TO BLUEBIRDS

Whether you have 1 bluebird nest box in your yard or an extensive trail, you've taken on a responsibility. Setting up a bluebird nest box or establishing a trail is much more than merely the act of selecting a box style, placing it in good habitat, and letting nature take its course. Some people would argue that it's not natural to monitor nest boxes, interfere with what type of inhabitant lives or does not live inside, and we should not disrupt the natural course of events. The truth is that nature was disrupted by mankind long ago and things will never be entirely "natural" again. There is nothing natural about a house sparrow. They were introduced to America less than 200 years ago and have since become the most abundant songbird on the continent. Bluebirds once nested in cavities in trees which were created by woodpeckers. As human development spread, these trees and natural nesting cavities were destroyed. House sparrows and European starlings (another non native species) competed with the bluebird for natural cavities.

Establishing and monitoring a bluebird trail is not about what's natural. It's about the "survival" of our beautiful native bluebird. Bluebirds today are dependant upon their human benefactors to not only provide them with a proper home, but to also monitor and care for that home so that they can safely raise their family in it. Simply put, anyone who puts out a bluebird box is taking on a responsibility and needs to take that responsibility seriously.

Many bad things can happen inside an unattended and unmonitored bluebird nest box. The house itself may split or rot, allowing cold and rain to enter. House sparrows may take up residence, attack bluebird chicks, destroy eggs, and even kill nesting adult bluebirds. House wrens may fill up unattended boxes with sticks, making them unusable by the bluebird. House wrens may also pierce bluebird eggs and remove young chicks from the nest. Mice can take over boxes and fill them with their own nesting material. Insects such as wasps and ants can invade boxes and drive bluebirds away. Blowfly larvae can suck the blood of young bluebirds. Mice, squirrels, and woodpeckers may enlarge the entrance holes, allowing starlings to take up residence or making it easier for predators to gain access to bluebird eggs and chicks. Unhatched eggs can break and nestlings can die, decay, and attract pests and predators. Unattended boxes also provide nesting sites for competing species to raise their young. Nothing positive for the bluebird will occur within a box that is not monitored.

If you have or know of unattended bluebirds boxes, please take them down. The bluebird will benefit in the long term by having fewer, well monitored nesting sites than many unmonitored ones. If you enjoy building boxes but do not wish to monitor them, consider donating the boxes to BBRP or others who will see that they are properly monitored. If you have a friend or neighbor with unattended boxes, invite them to come along with you when you monitor your trail and help them experience the thrill of watching bluebirds successfully raise their chicks. If they still do not wish to monitor their boxes, encourage them to either take them down or allow you to monitor them. Bluebird success will not be determined by the number of nest boxes we put up but rather the quality of the monitoring program used by the nest box owner. 1 well placed and well monitored nest box will benefit the bluebird significantly more than 100 unattended ones.

### Top Ten Tips for Successful Bluebirding

**1) Commitment** Commit to opening and checking the contents of your nest boxes AT LEAST once a week during nesting season. Keep written records of what you find. Weekly checking identifies problems and determines the success or failure of each location to attract and raise bluebirds. **IF YOU CANNOT MAKE THIS COMMITMENT, DO NOT INSTALL NEST BOXES.**

**2) Habitat** Select habitat in an open area close to scattered trees, at least 300 feet from brush. Place the nest box in SHORT or MOWED GRASS, with nearby perching sites; overhead wires, pasture fencing, or a standing dead tree. Bluebirds prefer high ground rather than wetland areas.

**3) The Right Nest boxes** Select a durable, waterproof nest box with an entrance hole the CORRECT SIZE for bluebirds. The box MUST be easy to open for regular checking and cleaning. BBRP recommends the Gilbertson PVC, the Peterson, or the Gilwood box. But none should be installed without proper mounting.

**4) The Right Mounting** First, have the site checked for underground utilities. Mount nest boxes on 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch SMOOTH METAL PIPE, with at least five feet from ground to entrance hole, with the hole toward a

tree or perch, not a road or highway. To eliminate climbing predators, NEVER mount on trees, fences or wood posts. The Steve Gilbertson idea of electrical conduit over robar makes an ideal mount.

**5) Spacing** Space nest boxes at least 500 feet apart. Overloading an area with nest boxes may result in increased populations of competitive birds such as house wrens and tree swallows, causing problems in future years.

**6) Welcome Desirable Birds** Allow nest boxes to be used by native cavity nesters, such as black-capped chickadees and tree swallows. If tree swallows are competing with bluebirds, try PAIRING two nest boxes 10-15 feet apart, with at least 500 feet to the next pair.

**7) Deal With Undesirable Birds** The nests and eggs of HOUSE SPARROWS MUST be removed. House sparrows are not native to this country and are the worst enemies of bluebirds. **IF YOU CANNOT DEAL WITH SPARROWS, DO NOT INSTALL BLUEBIRD NEST BOXES.** Avoid placing boxes where house sparrows are abundant - near livestock farms or within cities. The PVC nestbox is the most sparrow resistant. To avoid possible retaliation, do not remove sparrow nests if bluebirds are nesting in the paired nest box until bluebirds have fledged. House wrens have become a problem for all cavity nesting birds. These sweet-singing little birds poke holes in other birds' eggs, carry out nestlings and take over nest boxes by filling them with sticks. Avoid areas where house wrens are likely to nest - brushy areas. Install nest boxes at least 300 feet from trees or brush.

**8) Monitor** Open the nest boxes at least once a week until the nestlings are 12 days old. Check after a heavy rain for wet nests, which can be replaced with dry grass. Keep blowfly larvae out of box. Remove a dead nestling immediately. Remove old nests after young have fledged, and before the second nesting begins. After the nesting season, if house sparrows are in the area, leave the door of wooden boxes open, and close the entrance hole of PVC boxes. This practice also eliminates mice from inhabiting the boxes during the winter months. The next spring, no sooner than April 1 in Minnesota, close wood doors and open PVC holes.

**9) Encourage others to follow best practices (Ten Tips)** Volunteer to help move, remove, or remove boxes that are poorly placed and/or improperly mounted. **THIS MAY BE AS IMPORTANT AS INSTALLING NEW BOXES TO HELP THE BLUEBIRD POPULATION!** Boxes mounted on trees, wooden posts, or T-posts without baffles provide easy access for raccoons and cats, and boxes in trees, in wetland areas, and by livestock farms produce mostly competitors of bluebirds: tree swallows, house wrens, and house sparrows.

**10) Report Your Results** Become a member of a bluebird organization that publishes results and makes recommendations. Send reports with your bluebird results every year. Share your experiences and knowledge so that bluebirds will be here for FUTURE generations to see and enjoy!

Bluebird Recovery Program  
P. O. Box 984, Faribault, MN 55021  
www.bbrp.org



## CONFERENCE 2008

Keith and I would like to thank each and every one of you for making our Conference a success. This was the year of challenges, I was dealing with a brother with terminal cancer, the gas prices were getting worse and then we had the snow storm the Thursday before the Conference. Keith and I have co-chaired the Conferences the last 4 years and we really enjoy it, but we also worry as expenses are higher, this year we had 280 people attend and we were so happy to see all of you. We keep hearing it's such a great thing after a long winter to get out and enjoy such a great time. We had outstanding Speakers with such a wealth of information from Keith Radel, Carrol Henderson, Peggy Boike, Murph, Carmelita Nelson and then we had our Al Batt with his wonderful stories, and Jason Davis from KSTP-TV "On the Road Again". John Beal provided the field trip to his trails, but even with the wet weather lots of people enjoyed it.

The Dick Peterson Award went to Steve Gilbertson and the Blue Birder of the year went to John Beal, they are a couple of great dedicated guys and they certainly deserved it.

Each year we get donations for goods for our silent auction and raffle and also money donated in which I can purchase items from Wild Wings so we have a great variety for our sales. We want to thank all of you and I hope I don't miss anyone as this is so appreciated, because all the money raised is used towards education that is put on during the year and for expenses.

Thanks to Lance Krog, Peg Boike, Darryl and Shirley Hill, Bob Hursh, Robert Roberts, Nick Stadler, Bob and Barb Webner, Pam Sundsmo, Dorothy Kvestad, Marlys and Glen Shirley, Tracey Hawthorne, Jan and Joe Forneris, Fern and Ken Vesledahl, Lorraine Spears, Moe Brand, Brenda Rasinski, Karen Taylor, Joe and Joanne Adelman, Irene Macdonald, Barbara Turk, Ellen Cook, Marie Hamilton and Jean Lister who donated money, and now I'll list all who donated goods. Bruce Smisek, Donna Thorson, Barb Wagner, Steve and Cheryl Eno, Steve Gilbertson, Jack Hauser, Barb Collapy and Wendy Thomas, Jim Rathert, Joanie and Denny Cradick, Sarah Johnson, Steve and Regna Garr, David and Julie Macleod, Lance Krog, Pam Sundsmo, Loren and Mavis Jacobson, Nancy Pinke, Carmelita Nelson, Mike Sandberg, Marty Raiser, Tom and Joan Nelson, Kim Crandall, Carl and JENean Mortenson, Mary Sutinger, Mary Kalinoski, Steve Malecha, John and Colleen Beal, Keith and Cheryl Radel, Dorothy Rogers, Ardy and Murph Murphy, Marilyn Suter, Loren and Mavis Jacobson, and Marie McClure. Again you guys are the greatest for your thoughtfulness for our cause.

Also to all of you who brought the delicious cookies thanks so much, and we'd also like to thank all of you who had lunch for your great patience while waiting. With the ice storm the morning of, created a few problems and the lunch was one. But oh it was so delicious and we had so many people come up and tell us afterwards that wasn't a problem. They got to visit and meet people they didn't know, I think birding and wildlife lovers always can make the best out of it. Thanks for that.

We have a site for the 2009's conference and it will be in Elk River so we hope you all can attend. This year we had friends attend from North Dakota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Nebraska, Illinois, Iowa, and of course Minnesota. Our five sweet ladies that come from Thunder Bay Canada couldn't come because of the snowstorm. They were certainly missed. It's great to meet people who have the same interests and come to learn all we can possible about helping our beautiful birds. You can go into our website BBRP.ORG and see pictures from the Conference that Ardy Murphy took and she does such a good job.

JENean Mortenson and Keith Radel, Co-Chairs

### Convention Pictures



Larry Buhr (Raffle,  
Joan Nelson (Committee)  
Glen Shirley (Coffee)  
Fern Vesledal (BBRP Committee)  
Carl Mortenson (Raffle)



**Morning Speakers:**

Keith Radel  
  
Jason Davis  
  
Carrol Henderson



Marilyn Sutter,  
(BBRP Committee) Greeter,  
  
Conference Guest  
  
Linda Buhr - Greeter



**Afternoon Speakers:**

John Beal, (Moderator) Keith Radel, Al Batt & Loren Murphy  
  
No Pictures available for Peggy Boike and Carmelita Nelson

## **Interview with John Beal, BBRP Bluebirder of the Year for 2007**

In 2007, Rice and Steele County bluebirder John Beal fledged 156 bluebirds from 24 locations for a total of 6.5 chicks fledged per location, making him the recipient of the 2007 Bluebirder of the Year Award. Our congratulations goes to John for his outstanding contribution to bluebird conservation. We recently interviewed John and thought you would be interested in finding out how he achieved such significant bluebird production and to what he attributes his success.

### ***John, what caused you to become interested in bluebirds?***

All my life I have had this love affair with nature. It probably came in part from being raised on the farm. Being outdoors allowed me to enjoy wildlife including lots of birds.

### ***How long have you been a bluebirder?***

I will be starting my 5th year this 2008 season.

### ***How did you get started?***

The simple answer would be "very poorly." Now that I have been associated with and belong to BBRP I can honestly say I knew nothing! Someone gave me what was called a bluebird house. Now I know it was not even close to what we now call "BBRP approved."

### ***What mistakes did you make in the early days and what did you do to correct them?***

I more or less stumbled through that first season, mounted the house that was given me in our back yard on a 2 X 2 piece of wood and we could not believe how lucky we were to almost immediately have a pair of bluebirds right there in our yard. Little did I know I had just put up what we refer to today, a perfect "Raccoon feeder!" Just before they were ready to fledge during the night MR RACCOON came along and ate all the babies! The scratches on the wooden pole along with the pinfeathers on the ground told me what had happened. That was the lowest moment in my entire bluebird career! I also made what I thought to be some other bluebird houses even guessing the hole size. I continued to do things wrong as I mounted them on steel fence posts and by doing so just put up more "raccoon feeders." I put them close enough to the road and fortunately Keith Radel saw them and stopped to see me to offer some help. I will never forget that day when I was made aware of BBRP as we sat on the edge of my deck talking about bluebirds. I listened to his advice, joined BBRP, and it has been a wonderful part of my life ever since. I can never thank Keith enough for introducing me to this wonderful hobby.

### ***What advise would you give to a new bluebird enthusiast to help them get started or improve their trail results?***

Fortunately we have so many good hearted, committed, and dedicated volunteers to talk to about how to help the bluebirds. Be sure to join BBRP, which will only cost \$1.00 a month. Our newsletters are full of tips and pointers plus dates for upcoming events. Read the 10 points brochure and pay particular attention to that very first item we call "commitment." Feel free to consult your county coordinator with any problems or questions. I would recommend both new and current members read the 10 points brochure once a month until you have all 10 points implanted in your mind. These pointers came from literally hundreds of hours of experience.

### ***What were the key factors in your success?***

I listened to the people that just flat know how to help the bluebirds. There are people in our organization that have been doing this for over 30 years. I listened to what they advised me to do. I attended seminars, annual BBRP conferences, to learn as much as possible. I know monitoring your boxes is absolutely a big key to being successful! We need to Monitor, Monitor, and Monitor! If I suspect or see evidence of problems with house sparrows or other predators I sometimes will check every other day to make sure I am in control of my trail. "Be Committed."

### ***Do you have any tricks you'd like to share with others?***

More and more I am convinced the bluebird loves to perch on their way in and out of the box. Try putting a point on a 2X4 about two feet long and drive it in the ground with a mall about 10 feet in front of your paired boxes. Take your cordless drill and attach a tree limb about 6' long to the 2X4 with some sheet rock screws.

### ***Do you have a "most memorable moment" you would like to tell us about?***

To be honest every day out on my trail is "memorable." Keith Radel told me one time, "John when you check your boxes it is just like going to the candy store." "You never know what you are going to find when you look in that box!" My fear is there are still people that are hung up on the old wives tale that if you disturb the bluebird or touch the eggs they will leave. This is absolutely, positively not true! I have even had a female sit tight on her eggs and not fly out of the box. I reached in with one finger, raised her up, counted the eggs, let her back down, closed the box and left. What a thrill that was! Check those boxes at least once a week and keep good records. That is where you will get the most enjoyment from checking your trail and being involved in BBRP. Being awarded the "Bluebirder of the year award" at this year's conference was definitely a "memorable moment." "Thank You," to all those that helped me learn the dos and don'ts of bluebirding to help me earn the award. Without that help it would never have happened. It was definitely an honor I will cherish for many years. Last but not least please allow me to say, hang around as much as you can with this wonderful group of volunteers. You will make lasting friendships along with enjoying nature at its best, "out there on your trail."

## Cooperative Hens Jointly Raise Brood of 8 Eastern Bluebirds

By Mary Beth Roen, Prescott, WI

I put up my first Bluebird nest box in 1988, nailing it to a tree in a patch of woods. Unbelievably, a pair of Bluebirds did nest in it, but a house wren destroyed the eggs. I've learned a lot in the 21 years since I placed that first nest box. I didn't have a lot of resources to turn to in those days. Today there are state and national Bluebird associations and conferences, books, and Internet list servers like Bluebird-L through Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Because of what I have learned, I now have all of my boxes mounted on electric conduit/rebar poles in open areas with stovepipe baffles to eliminate mammalian predators. I have had a lot of great experiences with my Bluebird trail of 53 nest boxes, but this year was exceptional.

On May 31, 2008, I monitored a pair of boxes, #11 and #12, in the back of our farm. Box #11 had 3 Bluebird eggs in it, and Box #12 had 2 Bluebird nestlings and 2 unhatched eggs. It was unheard of to have Bluebird nests in each of 2 nest boxes pair 15 feet apart, so I didn't know what was going on, but assumed the box with eggs was abandoned. When I monitored the trail again on 6/7/08, the nestlings and eggs were all gone! The nests were not disturbed, and with the baffles on both poles, I had no idea what happened. The most likely possibility was avian depredation. I removed both nests and when I monitored my trail again on 6/15/08, there were five Bluebird eggs in box #12.



I was on vacation and couldn't monitor again until 6/27/08 when I found 9 Bluebird eggs in box #12! The only way I could explain this, was that two females were laying eggs in the same nest box. Maybe it was a mother and last year's daughter. That might explain why there was no rivalry between the two females. On July 4 there were eight nestlings about 2-3 days old and one infertile egg. I set up my video camera and documented two females and one male Bluebird feeding the nestlings. I could see that the Gilwood nest box was not going to be big enough for eight nestlings, so I built a bigger box, inside dimensions of 7.25" by 6.5" by 9 inches deep. I made two 1.5-inch holes in the front of the box. I thought it would be interesting to see if both holes would be used, maybe at the same time, and I did get pictures of this occurring. I hinged the roof of this box so I could take pictures more easily from the top.



On July 8, I moved the whole nest with nestlings to the larger box, on the same pole as the smaller box had been, and set up my video camera to be sure the parents would accept the new nest box. It showed that 5 ½

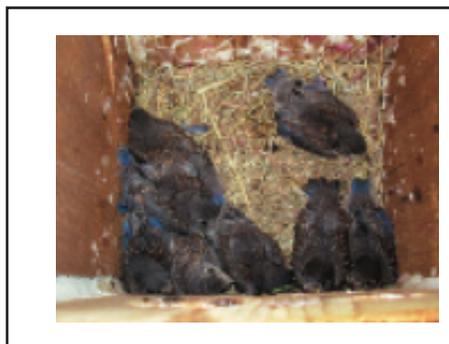


minutes after I moved the nestlings, one of the females flew to the top of the new box, and in less than 8 minutes, went in the box. It took about 19 minutes for the male to enter the new box. They accepted it! The nestlings were well cared for by the three parents. One nestling was smaller and seemed less developed than the others, so I watched it closely and took pictures daily. The picture taking did not disturb the nestlings. I was careful not to stay more than 2 minutes. They sat quietly and “froze” when the top was opened. I put the video camera out by the box on 7/11 and taped the parents feeding the nestlings 46 times in 69 minutes. The “runt” continued to grow quickly, and soon it could hardly be distinguished from its siblings.

On July 18, I checked the box, and six of the eight nestlings had fledged at 17 days of age. The remaining two nestlings fledged the next day, on July 19. I had my motion activated camera set up and did get a few pictures as the last two nestlings were sitting in the holes ready to fledge out in to the big world. It was like they were saying “good-bye” to me. On July 20 when I looked in the box, it was empty. All eight nestlings fledged successfully. As far as I know, this was the first documented case of two females nesting in one nest box. I am leaving the larger 2-hole box up where it is, to see if it is used again next year.

In 21 years, I have never bonded to any nest of Bluebirds as I did to this one. My Bluebird obsession went up several notches and I truly have “empty nest syndrome”! Many people at work, church, and home have followed the progress of these Bluebirds, and so they have increased Bluebird awareness, too.

My hope is that these fledglings survive to come back next year to start a new generation of Bluebirds. This is why Bluebirds get in your heart and never leave. I love happy endings!



## What Is A Sparrow Spooker And How Do I Use One?

Before we get into what a sparrow spooker is, let's talk a little about what it is NOT. A sparrow spooker is not:

1. A substitute for monitoring
2. A substitute for year round trapping and disposing of sparrows, using cheap bird feed containing millet and cracked corn, or taking down unattended nest boxes which are occupied by sparrows.
3. A permanent means of keeping sparrows out of bluebird nest boxes
4. A substitute for proper placement of bluebird nest boxes AWAY from areas which are prone to sparrow inhabitation

A sparrow spooker is a "TEMPORARY DETERRENT" which in many cases has proven effective in keeping sparrows from entering bluebird nest boxes IF, and ONLY if, it is used correctly. Another common name for a sparrow spooker is an orange flag due to the orange material from which the streamers are made. We really do not know exactly why or how a sparrow spooker works or why it helps to keep sparrows from entering a nest box. One theory is that the male sparrow loves to sit on top of his claimed home and sing to attract a mate. The fluttering of the streamers may serve as a sufficient irritant that it causes him to continue looking. Another theory is that the eyesight of seed eating birds may not be as keen as insect eating birds and the sparrow is uncomfortable maneuvering between the streamers waving in the wind. But for whatever reason, many bluebirders have reported a significant reduction in egg and chick losses from sparrows once they began using sparrow spookers in the correct way and at the correct time.

It is with some hesitation that we publish this information because these streamers are not effective if left up permanently or put on at the wrong time. We have some concern that they will be viewed as a "cure all" for sparrows and not used correctly, causing sparrows to become unaffected by them over time. But hopefully everyone reading this will use them correctly and this tool can help save bluebird eggs and chicks which would otherwise have been lost.

Pictured are two examples which have been used successfully by BBRP members. One is made from PVC piping with holes drilled in the cross piece so that the streamers hang down over the top of the box. The other is a simple piece of wood with the streamers at the top. Both utilize cotter pins to hold the streamers in place. The material in both examples is orange "crime scene tape" which can be purchased at a hardware store. The streamers are made from approximately 10 strips of orange tape of slightly different lengths which are bent in the middle and held together with a cotter pin. The strips of tape must be long enough so that they touch the top of the box or dangle slightly above the entrance hole. There are many variations of this basic design but the general premise is to provide multiple shiny or bright streamers suspended above the nest box. Some designs call for Mylar to be used, although we do not have experience with this material.

It is imperative that the streamers be used only as a temporary deterrent. Place them on the nest box after the first bluebird egg is laid. Remove them immediately after the first brood of chicks fledges. Replace the tape so that it is always a fresh, bright orange. Put the streamer back on the box when the first egg of the second clutch is laid and remove it again immediately after the chicks fledge. Streamers which remain in place for extended periods and become torn and faded ARE NOT effective and will not deter sparrows. Once sparrows become accustomed to them, the streamers will no longer work. For this reason, streamers must be viewed only as a temporary aid in deterring sparrows from entering the nest box only during occupancy by bluebirds. Long term sparrow management requires year round trapping and disposal of captured sparrows, refraining from feeding cheap bird seed containing millet and cracked corn, proper placement of bluebird boxes in areas which are not prone to sparrow infestation, and removing of unattended nest boxes which allow sparrows to reproduce. Sparrow spookers which are used correctly will not deter bluebirds from entering the nest box to care for eggs and chicks. They also will not deter house wrens.

Additional information regarding the construction, design, and use of sparrow spookers can be found at [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org) and [www.sparrowtraps.net/spookers.htm](http://www.sparrowtraps.net/spookers.htm).



## Monitoring Bluebird Nest Boxes

By Mary Roen

2008 is my 21st year of monitoring a Bluebird trail. Over the years I have made many mistakes, and have become a lot smarter. This is partly due to my own learning, but largely due to advice from other Blue birders, especially at Bluebird conferences and the Cornell list server, Bluebird-L.

It seemed I was always missing some important tool or supply when I did my weekly trail monitoring. At first I was walking my trail, so it meant a trip back to the house to get what I needed. I got a little smarter and carried a nylon bag with some supplies, but it seemed I was always digging to the bottom, or emptying out all the contents to get what I needed. I finally hit on a system that has worked for me for several years now. I use a small plastic toolbox that you can get at almost any hardware or discount store. I put the following supplies in the toolbox:

1. Wren guard to minimize predation from house wrens once Bluebirds lay at least 1 egg
2. Van Ert in box trap for house sparrows (It is very important to learn to use this correctly)
3. Hole reducer (1 1/8") when Chickadees use the nest box. (Keeps larger birds from taking over the nest box)
4. Ruler for miscellaneous measurements
5. Vinyl glove for sanitary removal of old nests
6. Monitoring notebook and pen to record what I see each week
7. Cordless screwdriver with extra bit (It is amazing how many I have lost!)
8. 3 inch plastic putty knife for cleaning out the nest box
9. Channel-lock pliers for pulling up the rebar if I choose to move the box
10. Mechanic's mirror to see in the nest when I monitor.
11. Pliers that can be used in numerous ways
12. Felt marker to number my nest boxes
13. Earplugs for protection when I pound in rebar when moving nest boxes. I use the plastic bag holding them to put old nests in, after the nestlings fledged. Old nests at the box can attract predators.
14. Band-Aids for mishaps (I never said I was perfect!)
15. Sunglasses
16. Wood screws for attaching the wren guards or hole restrictors
17. Extra hose clamps for attaching the baffles to the pole
18. Extra box mounts
19. Miscellaneous screws
20. Duct tape. (What can't you fix with duct tape?)

I now monitor the nest boxes on our property with a 4-wheeler, and the boxes on family and neighbor's properties by car. With my toolbox of supplies, I have not had to make trips back home for things I am missing. I want my monitoring time to be enjoyable, as it is one of my favorite hobbies. Over the years I have learned to monitor 'smarter not harder" and that makes for a much more enjoyable experience.

Mary Roen



## Where have all the Mealworms Gone?

Mealworms are big business in this country. We all know that our beautiful bluebirds relish them and eat them by the thousands each year. Mealworms are also the staple diet for many types of captive reptiles like geckos, chameleons, and bearded dragons. Reptiles consume them in a variety of sizes too – mini, small, medium, large, extra large. But the demand for mealworms does not stop there. Anglers use them as bait. Aquarists feed them to certain varieties of tank raised fish. They also provide food for pet Sugar gliders (a small species of gliding possum native to Australia). Wildlife rehabilitators rely on them as food for many varieties of birds and wildlife that will only eat insects. For them, this has truly been a matter of life and death. Mealworms also provide treats for domestic chickens, pheasants, and other fowl. Simply put, raising mealworms is big business and there is a huge demand for them as food for many types of birds and animals in this country each year.

Would anyone have ever thought the demand for meal worms would exceed the supply or that we would be facing a national mealworm shortage? We’ve all felt the pains of increased prices for gas and groceries but now mealworms too? Who would ever have thought? This year the nation’s top mealworm suppliers simply ran out and now we are faced with a mealworm crisis. Or at least it seems like a crisis to all the people who have been unable to find any – or find them at a reasonable price. The reasons for the mealworm shortage vary but it appears that there are a couple of main meal worm growers who provide worms to all of the other suppliers in the country and something has gone awry at the nations top meal worm farms. Up to 70% of the mealworms sold in the country may come from one mealworm farm and all of those worms are dying for unknown reasons. The suppliers start them and then suddenly they all die off. I guess you’d call it a crop failure at the mealworm farms.

Reports vary and the exact cause is unknown but speculation is that either something is wrong with the medium/grain/bran that the worms are raised in, a virus is killing the worms, or a parasite may have caused the mealworms to become sterile and unable to reproduce. Mealworms are raised in grain or bran and one report stated that a new strain of disease resistant wheat did not allow the meal worms to reproduce. One supplier indicated that for unknown reasons, the young mealworms have all been dying. It was suspected that something was wrong with the growing medium but the exact cause is still unknown. According to this supplier, they were 200 million worms behind in their orders. Now that’s a lot of worms!

And mealworms take awhile to grow. If the suppliers sold them when they were small, none would make it to the medium, large, or giant size. Once the first batch of mealworms finally reached adult size, they were still unable to be sold because they were needed for reproducing to keep the farms running. Reports seem to indicate that the crisis may be nearing an end and the mega worm farms are expecting to be fully operational by the end of July. Other reports say that it won’t be until September before we start seeing mealworms available in any large number or at the quality and price we have all become accustomed to. We may never know the exact cause of the mealworm shortage but we bluebirders are

not alone. If you Google “Mealworm Shortage” there are thousands of sites, threads, and blogs from people who raise reptiles, tropical fish, sugar gliders, or rehabilitate wildlife and all are lamenting the lack of mealworms.

Fortunately the shortage occurred at a time when wild insects were readily available for nesting bluebirds and probably did not cause any serious harm. The emotional damage to us humans who were unable to obtain worms for our beloved blues was probably more significant than it was for them bluebirds themselves. But this has been a serious matter for anyone who raises or rehabilitates birds and animals that were dependant on mealworms for food.

If you routinely feed mealworms to bluebirds, now may be the time to consider starting your own mealworm farm. Generally speaking, mealworms are easy to keep and raise. A “mealworm farm” can be established in a large plastic storage bin with a 1 inch medium of bran, cornmeal, chicken mash, or oat meal. (If using bran as the growing medium, it would be wise to use food-quality bran rather than the stuff used for animal food since problems in the bran may have caused the mealworm shortage) The container must be covered with screen or mesh to allow for ventilation. Keep the container in a warm, dark place. Provide food such as banana peels, dry cat food, sliced raw potatoes, or sliced apples. Do not add water to the container - moisture will be provided by the food source. Avoid food which is high in moisture as the medium must remain dry. The bottoms of egg cartons should be placed on top of the medium. This will allow the larva to crawl out of the medium for easier removal and a dark place for the adults to burry under and lay their eggs. Mealworms can be easily removed from the cups of the egg cartons for feeding. Remember that enough worms must reach adulthood and turn into beetles to lay eggs so that the cycle can continue and the farm remains productive.

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**ATTENTION**

**April Conference Cookie Contributors!!!**

• **There has been a request for the recipe for the delicious CHOCOLATE DROP COOKIES that were brought to the cookie table by someone! Please send us the recipe, if you would be so kind, and we will print it in the next newsletter for all that would like to give them a try. Especially interested is the one who was SO anxious to find the baker of these delicious cookies that day at conference, Marsh Johnson. Perhaps the chocolate cookie baker could call or write him at 4521 Heritage Hills Circle/ Plymouth, MN 55437 or phone number 952-831-6593. We hope to hear from you, our mystery chocolate cookie baker!!**

**Thank you!**

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## BBRP Mail Order Sales

After many years of dedication to BBRP and managing both our mail order sales and sales of bluebird items at the annual conference, Mary Kalinoski has retired. BBRP extends our heartfelt gratitude for the many hours Mary (and her sister Pam) devoted to finding unique and interesting bluebird items and for handling the sales of these items over the years. Without her assistance, these wonderful treasures would not be adorning our homes today. Filling her shoes will not be an easy task and at the present time we do not have a volunteer to take over the mail orders or sales items at the conference. As a result, the mail order sales have been temporarily discontinued. We are researching other possibilities such as a third party vendor to handle internet sales. We are also looking for someone who may have an interest in crafts and unique bluebird "stuff" and would be interested in assisting BBRP by handling the mail orders and conference sales. If anyone has time to volunteer and might be willing to assist us, please contact Lance Krog at lancek@frontiernet.net or 952-469-2054.

Thanks again Mary and Pam!

### Check Your Expiration Dates

Just a little reminder to check the expiration date of your membership. The date is printed on your newsletter label. The 4 numbers above your name indicate the Month and Year that your membership will expire. For example: 06 09 would indicate an expiration of June, 2009. If the last 2 numbers are 99, this indicates a Lifetime membership. If your membership is nearing expiration (or has already expired), please renew so that your subscription to Bluebird News is not interrupted.



### New Members

Cynthia Alsip	Inver Grove Heights
Joyce Benson	Prior Lake
Ron Bowen	Princeton
Rochelle Bultman	Northfield
Gary and Mary Carlson	Northfield
Linda Cichanowski	Winona
Becky Colin	Shawnee, KS
Marge Davis	Menomonee, WI
Laura Emmer	Prior Lake
Luella Gustafson	Vesta
Paul Hoversten	Lynd
Ken Hunter	Wilder
Tim and Julie Kiehne	Lanesboro
Phyllis Kohlmeyer	Caledonia
William (BJ) Meierhofer	Sauk Rapids
Charles and Susan Nelson	Duluth
Mary Peterson	Northfield
Trent Schumacher	Heron Lake
Chuck Schwantes	Prior Lake
Colleen Tell	Prior Lake
Donna Thaemlitz	Lakefield
Steve Toepfer	Oacoma, SD
Nancy Williams	No. Mankato
Jim Zimmerman	Onalaska, WI

### New Lifetime Members

Roger Minch	Fargo, ND
Tony and Barb Nowak	Owatonna
Elizabeth Murray	Lynd

**Bluebird Recovery Program  
Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis**



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Faribault, MN 55021**

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