# FIELD NOTES

## An Eastern Bluebird Nest with a Twist

*Dan Furbish*

When I was a young boy, living in Holbrook, Massachusetts, in the 1950s and 1960s, Holbrook was "country." We lived in a nice neighborhood, where our home backed up to a beautiful mixed-hardwood forest with small brooks and ponds and varied habitats. About a mile from our home, on the other side of the forest, was a high-tension power line that went for miles into Randolph in one direction, and to Braintree and Weymouth in the other direction. My friends and I explored this area extensively. We called it the "woods" and the "Big Corner." I spent my childhood in the woods. I'm not any good at Trivial Pursuit, and when folks talk about old TV shows I can't relate, because my childhood was spent in the woods. I knew every tree, every bush, and all the wildlife that lived in the woods behind our home.

I can remember those different habitats like it was yesterday. Behind a good friend's house on the other side of the neighborhood was a field, "White's Farm," with a nice milking herd of Holstein cows. I can remember spending hours watching Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) flying in and out of old tree holes up there. I was fascinated with the colors of those birds; they reminded me of the American flag — red, white, and blue. They stayed in small family groups and attended to their nests and young so diligently. I've always loved Eastern Bluebirds because it seems like they stay as a family unit and work cooperatively as a team.

Many years later, I was hired by the Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Regional Center as the caretaker/property worker for the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary (DWWS) in Marshfield. After working for a while in those beautiful fields, I couldn't figure out why Eastern Bluebirds didn't nest on the property. The staff told me that they had nested there, but not with any regularity, and that because they choose to nest where there are short grasses, they usually nested in boxes up by the farmhouse where, unfortunately, they were often predated by House Sparrows. So in the spring of 1996 I set a goal for myself: I would get Eastern Bluebirds to nest consistently at DWWS.

The battles over who gets the best nesting boxes start as soon as the first Tree Swallows show up in May. Tree Swallows get the best nesting boxes for the first nesting period, probably because the grasses are long then. We've found that Eastern Bluebirds favor sites with short grasses, where they usually hunt from a high perch, peering over a large expanse of low-cut vegetation, looking for small crawling insects. In mid-July the Tree Swallows fledge their young and vacate the boxes.

During the weeks when the Tree Swallows are nesting in the 70 or so boxes on site, the House Sparrows try to take charge of two out of the three boxes up by the parking lot. I wanted to attract bluebirds, so for one nesting box I built I chose weathered wood that most looked like an old tree. Although new rough-sawn wood

looks old when it's left outdoors for about four months, I wanted to get a jump start on this box, the one closest to the farmhouse (box #X16), because the grass is short in that area. This upper field does not attract grassland-nesting birds, so it gets mowed in the last week of June. I hoped that bluebirds would be attracted to a weathered-looking box there.

It worked, with a little help from me. In June 1996 I watched as Eastern Bluebirds tried to defend this nesting box, only to be harassed by two, and sometimes three or four House Sparrows trying to defend the same box. That year I removed 14 House Sparrow nests before the bluebirds established the box as "theirs." (The male and female House Sparrows worked like there's no tomorrow; I once watched while it took them only six hours to build a complete nest!) Fortunately, here at DWWS once the bluebirds establish their nest, the male bluebird fiercely defends his home and the House Sparrows give up, offering only occasional harassment, especially after the chicks hatch. This is in contrast to other locations where House Sparrows have been seen to kill bluebirds on the nest by pecking them on the head, then building their own nest over the corpses (personal notes from data recorded over many years of monitoring nesting boxes at DWWS).

In the years after that first spring, I removed 13 to 15 House Sparrow nests each season before the Eastern Bluebirds became established in the nesting box. For nesting material they used the fine, short grasses that were typical of their habitat. Every year since 1996, two to four young bluebirds have been banded from box #X16. As I mentioned, this box is in a field that has long grasses until the last week of June. When we cut the field to make hay, the stubble is apparently short enough to entice Eastern Bluebirds to this box. It's my feeling that the bluebirds probably have already raised one brood in a short-grass habitat by this time; and that this site, box #X16, might have been their first site, but that they shied away from it when they saw long grasses growing during the nesting season. On any given day in the winter and early spring, before the breeding season, one can observe bluebirds acting out the breeding rituals on this box. But then the grass grows high, and they apparently look elsewhere for their first nest cavity.

The spring of 1999 was different. The first nesters in box #X16 were Tree Swallows (as usual). The second nesters looked like they were going to be a pair of Eastern Bluebirds (as usual). The birds performed courtship feeding on the nesting box.

On June 11 the female started to build the nest, with the male showing a defensive posture and round-the-clock presence. There was bonding between the two bluebirds, and everything was going well. On June 24 there was one egg, then within a couple of days there were three bluebird eggs. Two of them hatched on July 14. Days went by, and the bluebirds were soon feeding their young.

Then one morning everything changed. I saw a female House Sparrow sticking her head out of nesting box #X16, and the young bluebirds were only three days old! I put my shoes on and rushed out and opened the box. Out flew the House Sparrow, and I expected the worst. But the two chicks were fine; the third egg had never hatched. In the cherry tree perch that the bluebirds used, a male bluebird was calling and calling, while the House Sparrow was scolding me from the brush pile. I checked the chicks again, closed the box, and went back into the house.

That summer we had two college students working with us, Julie Tilden and J.J. Healy, both interested in learning about bluebirds. The three of us watched as this saga unfolded. We saw the female House Sparrow fiercely defend "her" chicks, going in with food (usually small food barely sticking out of her bill, apparently grass seeds), and flying out to discard the fecal sacs. No male House Sparrow was ever near this nest. When the male bluebird tried to get near box #X16, the female House Sparrow drove him off. But the persistent bluebird managed to bring in large insects, most of them with large wings like moths or flying ants, and fly out with fecal sacs.

The female Eastern Bluebird was never seen again at this location, although a female bluebird was seen by the barns for the first time. The female House Sparrow and the male Eastern Bluebird fed and cared for the young bluebirds for about 15 days, certainly a welcome variation on the theme of House Sparrows killing bluebirds! Others have reported House Sparrows caring for offspring that were not their own (M. Hersek 1999. Selfish Altruism: Cooperative Breeding in Birds, *Bird Observer* 27 (5):241-246, and K. Hudson 1999. Interspecific Helping Behavior: House Sparrows at Baltimore Oriole and Eastern Kingbird Nests, *Bird Observer* 27 (5): 247-249).

On the morning of July 26, at about 10 a.m., box #X16 was not active. I searched the farmhouse yard and found the female House Sparrow attending a young Eastern Bluebird in the brush pile and feeding it, picking up what I found out later to be white millet seeds from an area where I feed birds; the fledgling ate the seeds. I located the male bluebird in front of the house, up in the locust trees, feeding another young bluebird grasshoppers and other winged insects. Two days later the male and the two young bluebirds were feeding in the hedgerow in front of the farmhouse, while the female House Sparrow was nowhere to be found.

When the young bluebirds, the adult male bluebird, and female House Sparrow were gone, I opened the nesting box, and I found that the nesting material consisted of white pine needles, rather than the usual short grasses. The closest white pine tree is over 300 feet away from box #X16! This was yet another surprising twist to an unusual Eastern Bluebird nest.

# Playing Tag with Osprey

*Tod McLeish*

Barely six weeks old, the young Osprey was clearly agitated as it climbed to the edge of the nest and scanned its surroundings. The bird tested the strength of its wings by jumping up and flapping a few times, and then looked skyward toward its soaring parents. They appeared to look down and call.

The young Osprey flapped its wings one more time, and then jumped.

It was the fledgling's first flight, so none of the onlookers expected it to be an expert right away. We all had heard stories of clumsy baby birds crash-landing in their first attempts at flight or getting stuck in awkward positions.

But that wasn't the case with this bird. Two seconds after take-off it was impossible to tell that this was a first flight. Its wing beats were strong and effortless. Its plumage was immaculate. And its soaring ability seemed comparable to that of its parents.

In fact, the young Osprey was such a strong flier that we never saw it land. Its first flight lasted more than thirty minutes, and continued long after we left, as the bird soared ever higher above its nest atop a utility pole.

The fate of the Osprey's siblings was not quite the same.

More than a dozen people had congregated that July day near the Osprey nest pole in Dighton, Massachusetts, in our annual attempt to band the nestlings. A bucket truck and crew from Eastern Edison Company, the local electric utility that installed the pole, arrived to elevate bird bander Gil Fernandez up to the nest.

As the bright yellow utility truck moved into position and inched Gil ever closer to the nest, the first and probably oldest young Osprey took to the sky amidst oohs and aahs from the crowd. A second nestling stood near the edge of the pile of sticks it called home and, as Gil reached toward it, took the plunge. It dropped quickly, but pumped its wings just hard enough to save itself from crashing, and slowly climbed to soaring height.

"Oh, darn!" cried one onlooker. "I guess we're just a little too late this year." We had missed the opportunity to band the first two Osprey. But we had not missed their glorious first flight. And there were still two young birds in the nest.

From the ground it was impossible to see what Gil was doing thirty-five feet above us at the nest. After appearing to struggle for a few moments, he put two brown lumps in a box and brought them down to the ground. When he opened the box, the birds didn't move. I thought they were dead. But he gingerly picked one up and held it out for all to see.

This Osprey looked identical to its parents — brown back and tail, white underparts and sharp beak and talons. The only difference was, this one wore a brown

leather hood, like the ones used by falconers, to keep it calm. Gil's short struggle was caused by his efforts to avoid the bird's flesh-tearing beak while putting the hood on.

"I've only gotten hurt once doing this," he explained, "when one bird's beak went straight through the palm of my hand. I've learned a lot since then." Two volunteers took body measurements — foot pad, beak, and weight — then held the bird out to Gil. One squeeze from a pair of pliers was all it took to secure the shiny aluminum tag around the bird's leg.

This was the fourth year the Osprey had successfully raised a family at this site. One of the young birds tagged in prior years had turned up in South America the following winter.

To appease the camera-toting crowd, Gil briefly removed the bird's hood. The young Osprey looked quickly around from face to face and from camera to camera, its deep orange eyes ablaze. Though unable to get away, it lashed out with its talons and opened wide its mouth to show us that it was still in charge.

The process was the same with the second nestling, and by the time they were returned to their nest, it appeared that the four Osprey circling above were ready to land. As the utility truck drove away from the pole, one adult bird immediately flew to the nest to check on its remaining offspring.

Two miles away, on the grounds of Bristol County Agricultural School at the edge of the Taunton River, the experience was repeated. From below it appeared that just one young Osprey was in this nest. But as the bucket drew near, two birds made their maiden flights.

The parent birds at this nest were not nearly as cooperative as the first ones, though. One circled the nest, continuously calling out with its loud, clear whistle. As Gil got closer to the nest to check for additional young, the other adult began to dive-bomb him in an effort to chase him away.

Higher and higher the Osprey flew. Then the bird flopped over into a nose dive, appearing at first as if it had been shot and was dropping to its death. As the Osprey picked up speed, it homed in on its target. Several feet before reaching Gil, the bird pulled out of its dive, made a U-turn, and flew straight up. Then it flopped over again and repeated the process.

Over and over again, the Osprey dove at Gil; all the while its mate was circling and calling out. Gil discovered one more young bird in the nest, which he removed for banding.

It wasn't until the utility truck had pulled away from the pole and the crowd had dispersed that the birds returned to hunting, feeding, and perching. And now that two of their three young had fledged, the adult birds had another job — teaching their young to fish.

# Osprey in Revere

*Geoffrey Wood*

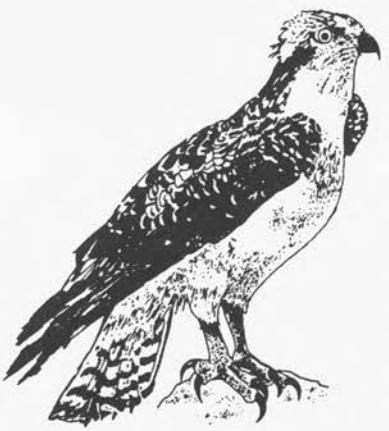
On Friday evening, March 31, I was dismayed to find a distinct lack of Osprey nesting structure on the North Revere marshes. We put up the nest pole many years ago, and for the last three years Ospreys have raised young at this site: 1997 (3), 1998 (2), 1999 (1). Since I was viewing from a distance, I hoped I was mistaken, and, besides, my field trip was going there the next day.

On Saturday from Oak Island we saw an Osprey grab some nesting material, fly back to the old pole site, and drop the material on the marsh. Clearly, I had to get a pole out there right away.

On Monday I was promised a 25-foot pole, so a platform was made; but the pole turned out to weigh well over 1000 pounds. The female and male Osprey were sitting out on the marsh just waiting for that pole. On Wednesday we found money to buy half a ton of wood in smaller pieces, and Rene Morin and Joe Nickerson and I headed out into the marshes to get the platform built. It is not easy to get out there. Two wide creeks intervene, plus it is a long way across those sinky marshes. The gale that was blowing didn't help. When we got the material to the site, there was no sign of the old structure in the ground; but as I reached the spot, two Ospreys, calling loudly, dive-bombed me. Wow, what site fidelity!

It took us about three hours to build the structure, and we had some fun because our canoe blew away and we almost got marooned. We were also working in over a foot of water at high tide. The Ospreys vanished after an hour, but as we waded ashore, one had returned to ride out the gale right next to the pole.

On Thursday, April 6, the female was on the nest platform, and the male was busy bringing sticks for her to weave into a nest.



I know there are a lot of Ospreys in southern Massachusetts, but this is Revere. It is possible to view the platform at a distance from Route 107. Head north out of Revere on Route 107. After crossing the Pines River, park and look eastward. The nest is north of Oak Island. If you visit Oak Island to get a close view, please be polite to the residents. Enter off Route 1A, turn west on Oak Island Street, cross the rails, and make your way into the small community to look northward (preferably on foot). There is one unnamed street heading west that gives a nice view of the nest.