

NESTING BOXES AND BLUEBIRDS

By Robert C. Leberman

Here in northwestern Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, the Eastern Bluebird ranks number one on the list of the so-called "disaster species". Formerly quite abundant in our region, it is now reduced to a small fraction of its normal numbers in most of its former haunts, and is completely absent in others.

Our Editor has asked, then, how I was able to band 100 Bluebirds in 1960. The entire credit goes to a friend, Mr. William Highhouse of Warren, Pennsylvania, and his project "Operation Bluebird". Starting with four nesting boxes in 1956, Bill has added to this number each year until he now has a run of approximately 100 boxes in Warren County. Although the Bluebird is also somewhat reduced in the Warren area, much of this high, rough and woody country is rather sparsely settled. These conditions have apparently discouraged the competitive House Sparrows and Starlings as much as it has encouraged the Eastern Bluebirds for they are still locally common there.

During 1960 Bluebirds occupied 48 of the boxes, and fledged 225 young. We were naturally concerned for the safety of the fledglings, but



(Drawing by the author)

opportunities to band large numbers of this species are few and it was agreed that 100 would be ringed. The banding was a complete success! Not one bird was lost as a result of banding operations. I believe it might fairly be stated then, that provided they are handled with care during the right stage of development, the banding can be accomplished safely.

Summary of the 1960 nest box results:

48 nesting boxes were occupied once with 221 eggs laid, 167 young hatched, and 160 fledged.

18 nesting boxes were occupied for second nestings with 75 eggs laid, 51 young hatched, and 51 fledged.

4 additional boxes visited only once had been used for one or more nestings.

It seems remarkable that only seven of the young birds which hatched failed to leave the nest (none of which had been banded). This unusual record was credited entirely to the application of a liquid type of flea powder to the nest prior to the hatching of the eggs. The flea powder controls the larvae of the birds nest screwworm flies which live on the blood of the live birds. During 1959 from 40 to 50 young Bluebirds succumbed to the effects of the fly larvae; during 1960 Bill believes there were no fatalities due to this cause.

Other species which used the boxes were Tree Swallow, 18 (62 young fledged); House Wren, 7; Black-capped Chickadee, 4 (23 young fledged).

The local Bluebirds have greatly benefited from this project, and a similar scheme would perhaps be successful, certainly worthwhile, in other areas.

If the nesting boxes are placed where they have as little chance as possible of being taken over by House Sparrows and House Wrens the project would seem to have the best chance of success. The birds can meet certain other competitors. On two occasions Black-capped Chickadees were known to have been chased out of their boxes by the Bluebirds after they had started to nest. They were also able to compete successfully with Tree Swallows for the use of certain boxes.

A. J. Saeger Hill, Meadville, Penna.

Fred Hebard writes, "Too little use is made of the banding files at Laurel. A good example was the fortuitous discovery of the only specimen of Common Nighthawk ever taken in Florida. . . I should think professors could work out a co-operative effort with the personnel there and perhaps discover a great deal of unknown distributional and migrational data for a given area."
