

BLUEBIRDS IN WARREN COUNTY, PENNA. By Charles Neel

The Bluebird has long been lauded in song and poem for its bright colors, cheerful song and as a herald of spring. It is a good thing that it is not necessary to see a Bluebird to have spring, or it would be winter for a long time for some people. Just think back, how many Bluebirds have you seen in the last few years? My wife and I have traveled many miles on dirt roads, through ideal habitat, without seeing a single Eastern Bluebird. Probably the chief reason for this is the scarcity of good nesting sites. By the time the Bluebird has returned in the spring, the House Sparrow has claimed many of the nesting holes, and the Bluebird must compete with the Starlings and House Wrens for the few remaining ones.

In the past there were many old orchards with dead, or partly dead trees, especially apple, that made ideal nesting places, but now, as soon as a tree does not produce due to age or disease, it is removed at once. Another reason the Bluebird is not found around the orchards, as in the past, is the intensive spraying program that is carried out to eliminate insects, and as this is one of the most important foods, the orchards have little attraction for birds. The mortality of the unfledged young, caused by the larvae of the blood sucking fly of the genus *Protocalliphora*, is estimated as high as 75% in some localities. The tree Swallow is also plagued with this pest and the mortality of young runs high in some sections.

With the interference of man, through his clean farming techniques, use of pesticides, competition for nesting places with other species, the loss of young from blood sucking larvae and the depletion from natural predators, it would appear that the outlook for the Bluebird is very poor. But such is not the case in Warren County, Pennsylvania. Warren County is situated in the northwestern part of the state, and is most wooded, but with some farming lands and also abandoned farms that are perfect habitat for many birds, including the Eastern Bluebird. Last year, 1964, there were 97 known pairs of Bluebirds nesting on these areas at one time. For a bird so scarce, this is a remarkable number, but all due to the efforts of one man who realized the plight of the birds and decided to do something about it.

This gentleman is William Highhouse, known to the newspapers as "Mr. Bluebird of Warren County," but to his many friends as just Bill. Bill started his project about 8 years ago by putting up a few boxes the first year and adding to them each year. At the present time he has about 100 of his own, and 50 more that were made and erected by another party who became disinterested and no longer takes care of them. During the nesting season these boxes are checked once weekly by either Bill or one of his friends, and a complete record is kept for each box. The boxes are sprayed at the beginning of each clutch, preferably after the nest is completed and egg laying begins. Only spray designated safe for cats

is used, and it is sprayed into the corners of the boxes. As the nest boxes are distributed over a large part of Warren County, one can understand that it is a very time consuming job, and Bill is a very busy man during the nesting season.

Knowing how occupied his time was, Chip and I offered to take over a route of about one third of the boxes to help out, thinking he would have a little leisure time to enjoy other things in life. But evidently the most enjoyable thing to Bill is Bluebirds and more Bluebirds, for he used his "spare time" to put up another route of bird houses. All the boxes are 5" x 5" inside, with a hole of 1½" in diameter, as the Starlings cannot get through a hole of this size. The lids are hinged with hooks on the outside, so that they can be checked easily, but the tops fastened so that wind and rain are kept out. The boxes are placed at a height of 4 to 5 feet, on fence posts or utility poles, in fairly open fields or along the edge of fields. Most Bluebirds have a second nesting, and this year were very successful, as approximately 80% raised a second brook. Average second nestings are usually about 50%.

The Bluebirds are not the only species to use Bill's boxes, as the Tree Swallow also is hard put to find a place to make a home, and occasionally the Black Capped Chickadee excels in squatter's rights. During the summer of 1964, only two of the 150 boxes were not occupied at least once, and most were used twice. Total results of fledglings were: 640 Bluebird, 218 Tree Swallows, 20 House Wrens and 7 Chickadees.

The nesting success of the Bluebird appears to depend greatly on the weather in May. If the weather is sunny and warm, the nesting success is greater. In 1963, the month was cold and rainy much of the time, and many of the nests were abandoned, the eggs did not hatch, and many of the young died in the nests. Though the number of nesting pairs were the highest recorded to that date, the numbers fledged were very low. The Tree Swallows also had a very poor nesting season that year. Incidentally, most people believe that Tree Swallows will only nest near water, but our nestings in this County disprove this thought. This section where they nested in on a high plateau, and there is not even a small stream or any ponds near it.

With an ideal situation for doing some study on the Eastern Bluebird, and as Mr. Highhouse has already laid an excellent foundation by furnishing the birds, Chip and I plan to band as many Bluebirds as we possibly can, beginning with the nice round number of 200--the number of Bluebirds we banded in 1964. (We really had to work for that last bird to make the number "round" since we were on vacation toward the last of the nesting season.)

By intensive banding we will try to answer some of the following questions: Do the adult birds use the same nest each year? Do they have the same mate each year? Do they keep the same mate for the second nesting?

Do they use the same box for the second nest? Do some females consistently lay more eggs than others, or does it depend on the age, health and weather conditions? Do some females tend to lay eggs much lighter in color than the regular blue? (Last year we had one nest with white eggs in it.) Will the young birds return to the same location when they start to nest? How long do Bluebirds live on an average, and do they live in the same nesting locality year after year? Where do the birds winter, and do they remain in family groups all winter? Do they winter in one large area or do they string out across the southern states? If anyone has any answers or ideas on these questions, I would like to hear from them.

Have you ever considered putting up nest boxes for Bluebirds in your area? Why not try a few in some of the old fields or orchards? If you have never seen a nest of baby Chickadees, you have missed a treat, for they are miniature replicas of their parents.

If anyone is interested in starting a nesting project such as this, we would suggest that they write to Bill. He will be glad to make any suggestions or answer any questions that you might ask. His address is William Highhouse, 8 Fourth Avenue, Warren, Pennsylvania.



RECORD AGES OF TREE SPARROWS

Walter Pudelkiewicz, Box 61-A, West Willington, Conn. -- "I'm writing this in response to the note by Winifred Power in the Jan-Feb issue of EBBA News 28(1):46 inquiring about any Tree Sparrow older than the one in The Ring Vol. III(34):181. I banded a Tree Sparrow (*Spizella arborea*) at Storrs, Conn. on 02-04-56. This bird returned to a banding station operated by Mrs. J. Lof of Storrs approximately 3 miles from the place of banding during the following years: 01-12-57, 01-11-58, 01-05-60, 01-03-61, 01-05-62, 02-16-63 and the last time caught was 02-25-64. This gives an age of 8 years and 22 days from the banding date."

M.C.Morse, Jr., 40 Revere Court, Burlington, Vermont -- "In reference to your note regarding Tree Sparrows in EBBA News, the following record is submitted on Tree Sparrow #54-65890; banded on 12-10-55 at Webster Corner, Lisbon, Maine. This bird returned on the following dates to the home station: 04-06-56, 12-30-56, 04-01-57, 01-25-58, 04-13-63, 11-28-63, and most recently on 11-25-64; a total elapsed time of 8 years, 11 months, and 15 days. The station at which this bird was banded has not been an active banding site since 1958. All returns since that year have been of a "one day operation" type; the station is generally worked one day in late autumn and one day in early spring."