

Jan. - Feb.

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
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Jan. 29, 1969 ... While checking the farm fences today, I noticed some Meadowlarks walking in the dead grass not far away. Since they could be heard calling on sunny days all through the fall and winter, I decided to flush them and see just how many had decided to try and winter in the immediate area. It was really surprising to

see a total of nineteen fly up and disperse to nearby fields.

The Meadowlark is by no means rare here in the winter. They have been recorded on 12 of the last 16 Christmas bird counts, but mostly in fields where cattle are being fed. Only once can I recall seeing any Meadowlarks here on the farm in mid-winter before and that was a single bird in 1954. There is usually a reason for everything so I decided to try to come up with the answer. To survive, everything needs food and cover and there has been a change in the nearby fields. Our closest neighbor passed away about two years ago and his stock was sold, but not the farm. His fields had always been overgrazed, by too many cattle and sheep, and as a result it was an excellent place to find Horned Larks and Killdeer. That has all changed now. This winter, high grass and weeds cover all the fields and the farm has that deserted appearance. Now those fields are a wonderful place for Meadowlarks to find plenty of seeds and dead grasshoppers.

Also, Tree Swallows are more abundant here this winter than I have ever seen them before and I am convinced that those overgrown fields are the answer. In the future it will be interesting to watch our birdlife change as the habitat changes, as now farms on all sides of us are no longer being farmed. I remember a remark made once by a friend. Jim had rented a house near a well-kept farm that was soon abandoned. He said that when he moved there one could see a rabbit almost anywhere on the farm but when he left 20 years later it would have been impossible to see even an elephant.

Feb. 9 ... It is Sunday afternoon and a cold, blustery day. A good time to look over the results of the 1968 Bluebird nestbox route and plan

for the next season. The following table gives the results for the last three years and does not include the results of Wesley Knisley who makes our boxes. Wes has a subpermit and banded 67 nestlings on his own route and says that House Wrens gave him much more trouble in 1968 than usual.

	1968	1967	1966
Total boxes checked	229	201	130
Boxes in which Bluebirds attempted to nest	182	158	91
Boxes used for second nesting attempt	102	100	29
Boxes used for third nesting attempt	11	11	0
Total eggs laid	1259	1015	516
Total eggs hatched	951	788	422
Young that apparently left boxes safely	816	578	377
Number of bands used on nest-box route	799	495	334
Banded young apparently left boxes safely	734	467	307
Number of young that left boxes unbanded	82	111	70
Boxes that produced 10 or more young per box	10	8	6

Some of the highlights of the 1968 nesting season are as follows:

A new box (No. 239) won top honors by producing 15 young from 16 eggs. This box was on a utility pole in a hilltop yard where Bluebirds had formerly nested in an old fence post. This pair of Bluebirds was more aggressive than the average and the male would chase all intruders away. The owner of the property saw a Flicker "commit suicide" (when chased) by trying to make a quick exit in attempting to fly through a large picture window. House Wrens nested in a wren box on the other side of the yard but they didn't bother this pair of Bluebirds.

Carolina Chickadees occupied four boxes and three of these successfully raised young.

Raccoons or cats destroyed eggs (or young) in three boxes and two adults were eaten. One box that was raided by a raccoon was elevated higher up on the utility pole to lessen future trouble. It was immediately taken over by a Tree Swallow and they raised four young. This was the first Tree Swallow nesting record for this county since 1893. After the Tree Swallows left, Bluebirds were successful in raising a brood in the same box.

A snake (I believe) destroyed eggs or young in two boxes.

Some boxes will be relocated in 1969 due to House Sparrow and House Wren activity. These Bluebird enemies lowered the survival rate consid-

ably. The following tables illustrate this.

	1968	1967
House Wrens and Bluebirds fought over:	46 boxes	42 boxes
Bluebirds fledged in these boxes	158 (3.4/box)	118 (2.8/box)
House Sparrows and Bluebirds fought over	21 boxes	19 boxes
Bluebirds fledged in these boxes	48 (2.3/box)	63 (3.3/box)
Bluebirds had no competition in:	108 boxes	90 boxes
No. of young Bluebirds these produced	571 (5.3/box)	397 (4.4/box)
Young found dead due to cold weather	48 (10 boxes)	151 (36 boxes)

I still prefer to leave the boxes up over winter as it would be quite a chore to take down a lot of boxes and then put them up again the next spring. They should be checked though, during February (in this area) to see if mice have used any for a winter home. At least, the boxes should be left up until all the Bluebirds have left in the fall since it appears to be in the fall that Bluebirds check for possible nest sites to come back to the following spring. Another good reason for leaving boxes up over the winter is because they make fine roosting places for hole nesting species. I have already checked a few of the boxes this month (for mouse nests) and found a Tufted Titmouse and a White-breasted Nuthatch using them as a snug place to spend the night. The Tufted Titmouse was already in box No. 104 two hours before dark.

In conclusion I might add that even a Bluebird nest box route can be a hazardous thing. Bumblebees took over one box last summer and wasps built in many boxes. Also, I kicked an unseen hornets' nest as I was checking box No. 156 and received a sting on the arm. Since I am very allergic to bee stings, that ended work that day. I found some string in the car and fashioned a tourniquet to try to slow down the action of the venom. Either it didn't work or I didn't get it on soon enough, because by the time I had driven home (five miles) welts were coming out all over me and my blood pressure was dropping fast (which can be quite dangerous as our doctor had informed me on an earlier visit for the same thing). My wife drove me to the doctor's office and we made it in time as I'm still here to tell the story. Needless to say, that box was not checked again all summer.

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