

# From Bauldry to BRAW: Trails Revamped = Success!

By Gene Birr, Oconto County Coordinator & Steve Mayer, Outagamie County Coordinator

During the early spring of 2008 my friend, Steve Mayer and I were building 60 nest boxes for bluebirds in the style we had learned from a local legendary bluebird enthusiast, the late Vince Bauldry from Suamico, Wisconsin. Each of us had attended seminars he gave promoting bluebirds in the mid 1990's. These boxes were 10" deep that had open rooftops covered with a wire - screen mesh and had inch thick baffles over the round entry holes. These features had been designed by Bauldry to encourage bluebirds to nest by providing a secure nesting cavity which was safe from the predation by raccoons.

While we were building I had sent for information to join the statewide bluebird group BRAW, the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, prompted by an article we had read written by Door County outdoor writer Roy Lukes in the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*. After we had completed our nest boxes we received our *BRAW Information Packet*, which contained many facts about bluebirds that we were not yet aware of, such as where to properly place boxes in good bluebird habitat. Most important and interesting to us, it recommended a much different shaped nest box, i.e. one that is smaller, less deep and is erected on a slender metal pole to deter raccoons.

Statewide, BRA W consists of 850 members including nearly 400 who monitor bluebird trails totaling 8,700 nest boxes. In 2009 they helped produce 28,814 bluebird fledglings as well as more than 11,000 Tree Swallows, 4,095 House Wrens, and 742 Black-Capped Chickadees. Having joined this association we were open to learning new ideas to encourage bluebirds, although we reluctantly accepted their suggestions for nest box design and the weekly monitoring because our previous ideas had been much different. Still, we became active members, eager to establish our new bluebird trails.

In 2008 I began monitoring a trail of 40 nest boxes on and nearby the farm

of my brother Curt in the town of Morgan in southern Oconto County. I had been using Bauldry boxes for several years, many of them still mounted on old wood fence posts and electric poles along country roadsides. That year I fledged only 24 bluebirds in five of my 40 boxes, an average of only .6 BB/box. Tree Swallows used 24 nest boxes and produced 124 fledglings, a 3.1 TS/box average.

In September Dr. Kent Hall, VP of BRAW, contacted me explaining ways I could improve the bluebird production on my trail. He met me and we scoured new areas to locate my trail. We began by contacting the superintendent of the Sandalwood Country Club in Abrams in southern Oconto County which is adjacent to my mother's family farm, now owned by my cousin Greg and his family. I had placed 15 nest boxes there three years earlier. Kent explained that golf courses are excellent habitat for bluebirds as they provide ample areas of short grass in which to feed for insects as well as sparsely located trees where they can perch while hunting. We found 12 sites there and located 20 more along nearby roadsides along a route connecting my home to the golf course and my brother's farm. Kent assured me I could double or triple my birds per box by selecting these locations. Later, Steve and I installed our recently built Bauldry boxes there but we had modified them, making them only 5" deep rather than 10" and we covered the open tops to make solid roofs.

The following spring 2009 I began monitoring this new trail of 55 boxes including these 32 sites as well as the best 23 sites of my old trail. Monitoring them weekly from April



Gene (above) and Steve (below) put the finishing touches on new NABS Style nest boxes they built for their trails.



through August I found my trail fledged 128 bluebirds in 31 of 55 boxes averaging 2.3 BB/box. This was nearly four times the average of my first years monitoring! This trail also fledged 113 Swallows, 16 Wrens, and 3 Chickadees. .

Providing nest boxes for bluebirds also makes them available for other cavity nesting songbirds such as Tree Swallows, House Wren, and Black-Capped Chickadees all of which use a similar sized nest site. These songbirds usually arrive and nest later than the earlier arriving bluebird so their competition for the nest box is not severe, especially when it is properly placed in good habitat desired by bluebirds.

The greatest threat to the nesting success of the Eastern Bluebird is the House Sparrow. The Sparrow competes fiercely with songbirds often killing them in the box or destroying their eggs and young. Controlling house sparrows is important to allow bluebirds the opportunity to compete

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for a nesting site. We often trap and destroy the adults that attempt to claim a nest box or we destroy the entire nest once the female has laid a full clutch of eggs and begins incubating them. This practice often discourages the house sparrow from nesting again, freeing the box for use by bluebirds.

On my 55 box trail in 2009 I contended with House Sparrows in 19 of them. During the season I destroyed 33 adults as well as several nests of eggs and young. In those 19 boxes I later observed and recorded 10 bluebird nests, 9 Tree Swallow nests and two Wren nests. Only four boxes remained empty.

Steve Mayer had similar experience with his trail in Outagamie County during his first year of monitoring in 2009. With the assistance of Kent Hall, he and I helped set up a nest box trail on the Crystal Springs Golf Course near Seymour. Within two weeks of erecting the 30 NABS style boxes on 1/2" conduit, all of which were supplied by BRAW, 17 of them were taken over by House Sparrows. His weekly monitoring and vigorous trapping eliminated 34 Sparrows. The trail fledged 69 bluebirds on the golf course and 19 more on a 10 box trail along a nearby farm for a total of 88 bluebirds in 40 boxes, a 2.2 BB/box average.

We had experienced much difficulty while inspecting our Bauldry deep box houses. Their side-opening doors open from the bottom and swing upward so viewing the nest, eggs and young was often tough to do especially since we had raised the floors to make them less deep. Often this meant that the nest box was erected too high and couldn't be looked into easily. Our efforts to control House Sparrows were also complicated by the bottom opening side door. Installing each Van Ert trap was tedious and time-consuming as it required using a stub-nose screw driver to install screws inside the front of a confined 4"X4" space. Because of our high numbers of sparrows we needed to install these screws into nearly 50 nest boxes! We began to realize that our high numbers

of sparrows may have been a result of our own making. Those 15 boxes on my cousin's farm adjacent to the golf course went largely unmonitored for 3 years except for spring cleaning and a couple visits during nesting season. It [s likely that the sparrows produced there moved on the golf course and nearby roadside trails. Steve's golf course trail also had several houses placed there years earlier that likely were not monitored and produced sparrows as well.

Having experienced this four month long struggle observing these nest boxes while seeing the success of regular monitoring and properly sized boxes located in ideal habitat, we were inspired to upgrade our inventory of bluebird houses. Last fall I acquired the inch thick, rough-cut white cedar lumber we needed from a local sawmill and Steve purchased an air-nail gun, a Dremel tool and a compound miter saw to improve our next box building abilities. Within three weekends we had completed 122 NABS bluebird nest boxes, including each one with Van Ert Trap screws for trapping sparrows. By late October we had removed all of our Bauldry boxes and replaced them with the new NABS boxes and added 10 boxes to each of our trails.

Meanwhile we had attended the BRAW State Convention in La Farge at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve in September, where we were encouraged by Dr. Hall to share our stories of bluebird trail success despite our troubles with sparrows. Being acknowledged for our efforts there was surpassed in November when we were contacted by BRAW President Joe Schultz and VP Kent Hall. Citing our "interest in continuing to improve our understanding of bluebird production," these BRAW leaders offered each of us the opportunity to become a new County Coordinator for BRAW. Steve in Outagamie County and Gene in Oconto County!

By accepting these positions each of us continues to pursue his experience of helping bluebirds find new homes while they, like us continue traveling down our bluebird trails.