

Bluebird Rescue!

By Marianne Jensen

The call came late in the evening, on the last day of July. Our friends on the other end of the line were leaving for a weekender, and knew that one of their bluebird boxes housed a brood of young ones. The problem was that the cat killed the male bluebird that day, AND our friends had not seen the female for quite some time. Could I, would I, please do something?

My first thought was that I really didn't want to get involved. Gee, I just sat down in the screen house for some R&R. Yet, that bluebird mom instinct kept nagging at me, and I reluctantly agreed to help.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, I drove the twenty miles to the site, parked a distance from the box, sipped coffee, and watched. I was hoping that the female would be there feeding the young ones breakfast. Unfortunately, she was a no-show.

I approached the box, only to find that it was inaccessible. I whistled and got a chirping response from the occupants. The box was old, and it appeared that I could rip off the roof. Done.

The scene inside that box was disheartening. Four bluebird chicks were nesting on top of their mother, who was in a state of decomposition, one wing stretched up the side of the box.

On the night of the call, I asked our friends to get a small container of fat, juicy wax worms from the bait shop nearby, and leave it in their garage refrigerator. Those worms were about to save the day for the stressed brood.

I whistled again and fed the two chicks that gaped. They gobbled about three worms each, but their siblings remained hunkered down.

The four birds were soon in a dry, grassy human-made nest in a small container. I covered them with a cloth, put the brood into the trunk and headed back those twenty miles to Governor Nelson State Park, near Waunakee, where I monitor a bluebird trail with my partner, Jim Stich.

At that time, we had two unvented slot boxes, with young of approximately the same age, somewhere in the 13-15 day range. I decided to put two orphans in each box. This brought the number of



Pat Ready

chicks to seven in one box and five in the other.

Pat Ready assured me that the foster parents would handle the situation just fine. "After all," he said, "Birds can't count."

My reasoning for the distribution was that I was sure the receiving families would fledge first, leaving the orphans alone. At least the newbies would have each other during their last days in a shelter.

For the next several days, I delivered roughly 20-30 wax worms to each site, twice a day — early in the morning and just before sunset. It was fun to witness the activity at each box during this time.

Young bluebirds started fledging from the box of seven the very next day. Their parents and one bluebird from the first brood came for waxworms, and headed either for the box or for the trees. On one occasion, the male parent headed for the trees with a mouth full of worms. He perched on a branch, and looked up, down, this way and that, as if searching for those darn kids, whom he told to stay put!

By the fourth day after the orphans arrived, all the young had fledged from that box. The parents took wax worms one more day, then were seen no more.

Down the road, near the corn field, the box of five provided more visual delights. On the third day after the introduction of the orphans, my husband spotted the foster parents, two of their fledglings, and one bird from their first brood on the power line perch. What a sight!

In two more days, that box was empty. The parents came for worms one more time, then the female alone came to the next feeding. Finally, no birds came.

Six days after the rescue, these lovely, adaptable, blue beauties were gone.