

# Door County Bluebirds

By Charlotte Lukes

Photos by Roy Lukes

We put up our first bluebird nest boxes in 1978 after buying land in the center of northern Door County. The only occupants for the next five years were tree swallows. In 1982 a quarter mile of electric line was brought in as house building began. By 1983 we had bluebirds in some of the boxes. Roy mowed a wide walking path around our 5 acre field and the bluebirds had power lines on which to perch as they hunted insects in the short grass.

During the previous ten years we lived in the Rangelight Residence at The Ridges Sanctuary in Baileys Harbor. Many cardinals came to the feeders but we never saw any bluebirds in the area. We lived within 1,000 feet of the Lake Michigan shore so tree swallows were the more common box-nesting birds.

We learned about BRAW in 1991 and joined the group but did not attend annual meetings until about 2000. In 2005 we began to enlarge our bluebird trail from 5 to 12 boxes. As we learned more about the bluebird's preferred habitats we asked local landowners and farmers for permission to set boxes at the edges of fields near mowed roadsides. It appeared that locations with electric lines overhead and some big trees in range for fledglings' first flight had more bluebirds.

We attended the 2006 BRAW annual meeting and volunteered to be Door County coordinators. Roy has written weekly natural history columns for local newspapers since 1968 so we had a connection with county residents.

Early in 2007 we presented free programs in Sturgeon Bay and Ellison Bay to educate interested people on building nest boxes and maintaining a bluebird trail. Roy wrote newspaper stories about these subjects and we developed an email list of Door County Bluebird Club members. We encouraged people to join BRAW to learn more about past successes and failures with bluebird trails. Roy & I realized that there was so much to learn, or, as Kent Hall frequently



**Newly hatched baby bluebirds with one egg just starting to be opened. The K-style box makes counting the eggs & young so much easier than side opening, and it is nice for photographing, too.**



**Bottom mount conduit method used by Roy.**



**Roy's new K-style box with the two openings shown.**

says, to think like a bluebird.

Kent was kind enough to come to Door County in late August 2007 to review several larger trails and give advice to the people for improvements. He also gave a talk in the evening at our church fellowship hall to an enthusiastic audience.

By 2008 we expanded our bluebird trail to 50 boxes. We felt it was important as county coordinators to set a good example for others to follow.

Monthly email communication with trail monitors continued through the season. We visited people to help with nest box problems and find the best possible sites for bluebird success. Weekly monitoring was stressed as was filling out the season end Form 21 and submitting it to BRAW.

Nest boxes used in Door County were the K-style, NABS and Peterson. We liked the top-opening style for easy quick monitoring, but found this box hard to clean out. After a few years Roy developed a K-style box with a double-thickness bottom which was mounted on top of the conduit pole and had the top opening for monitoring and also a side opening for easy cleaning. The wood used was full inch thick cedar and made the boxes cooler on hot summer days and a bit more insulated and warmer during cool spring weather.

In the early spring of 2008 Kent & Sue Hall came to Sturgeon Bay to present a bluebird nest box program. It was well-received and brought more members to BRAW and gave encouragement to many people to start their own bluebird trails.

Here is a brief summary of our first three years as Door County coordinators. For 2007 we had 43 trails with 58 monitors and 255 boxes resulting in 730 bluebirds, 250 tree swallows, 90 house wrens and 6 black-capped chickadees. In 2008 there were 48 trails with 64 monitors and 411 nest boxes resulting in 876 bluebirds, 434 tree swallows, 245 house wrens and 7 black-capped chickadees. In 2009 we had 49 trails with 67 monitors giving a total of 1023 bluebirds, 567 tree swallows, 287 house wrens and 29 black-capped chickadees.

There were 77 trails over the past three years with 101 monitors, but some people have moved away and others quit due to health or age problems. There were 20 trails that the 23 monitors only reported for one year. We have 20 trails with 31 monitors who have reported all three years and five of these trails have substantially increased their numbers of boxes. In 2009 we had 13 new trails with 17 new monitors submitting reports.

State records were set for 2009 with

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Door County being one of only five counties in Wisconsin producing more than 1,000 bluebirds. We also learned that we rated #2 in numbers of monitors behind Eau Claire County which had many girl scouts participating.

There is a lot of open land in Door County suited for bluebird nesting. Our next challenge is to increase awareness and interest for bluebird trails in southern Door County, south of Sturgeon Bay.

Roy will write a major story on nest boxes, bluebirds and monitoring for the March 5<sup>th</sup> issue of our local newspaper, The Peninsula Pulse ([www.ppulse.com](http://www.ppulse.com)). We will communicate with as many present and former monitors as possible to encourage more bluebird trails and better monitoring and reporting. We want to see the bluebirds increase their population in all of Door County to help Wisconsin reach its goal of 30,000 annual fledglings.

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