

English Sparrows Dominate Bluebird Boxes Despite Repelling Devices

By Leif Marking

I was born and raised on a dairy farm that supported up to 35 milk cows and also about 200 laying hens, and a few hogs. This kind of diversity farming program was sufficient to provide a decent living for numerous country folks. Inadvertently these numerous small farms provided ideal habitat for the ever-expanding population of the exotic English Sparrow. The barns, sheds, and other outbuildings provided sheltered nesting habitat close to waste feed, seeds in storage, spillage, or in animal manure. Thus, all the requirements for successful survival and reproduction of English Sparrows were available, and soon they became the most numerous bird species in North America. Our farming operation harbored perhaps 50 or more sparrows at times and many other small farms in the community supported similar numbers.

Although artificial nest cavities were not provided for sparrows, they adapted to all sorts of cracks, crevices, platforms, and spaces provided by trusses and construction niches. They always nested in the hay track-carrying device in the loft peak where they were safe from predators and humans. Sparrows are engineers and architects for building nests in the most challenging locations inside buildings.

Then, when a building inside is saturated with sparrow nests, they have the capability and innovation to make nests in outdoor straw piles, hay stacks, some farm machinery, and they can resort to building nests in trees such as arborvitae and other evergreens and bushes. With all these diverse nesting capabilities and adaptations, I firmly believe that sparrows will nest in any box type

or cavity that a bluebird will use for nesting.

During the last few decades farming practices have changed dramatically. Small family type farms have disappeared when these families could no longer prosper, and perhaps large or corporate farmers operate ten or more small acreages. Consequently, much of the traditional nesting habitat



and stock feeding areas for sparrows has become unavailable. So sparrows living in the country either seek urban areas or extend their range into the environment where they compete with bluebirds and other cavity nesters for available artificial or natural cavities.

I have tried some of the technology reported to discourage sparrows from nesting in my bluebird boxes with considerable frustration and with a greater desire to kill those intruders to improve the production of bluebirds. My box number 52 is located on Asmus Road just off HWY M near West Salem WI. I maintain successful bluebird boxes within 200 yards of this box, which is about 200 yards from inactive farm buildings. Sparrows threatened the NABS-style box at that site several years ago so I replaced it with a K-type entry box in which the oval entry adjoins the roof. Sparrows continued to threaten the bluebird nesting attempts. So this

nesting season I added the Plexiglas sparrow reducer as reported by Gary Gaard in recent Wisconsin Bluebird issues.

On 4/24 I noticed sparrow-nesting material so I placed a Van Ert sparrow trap in the box and 2 hours later dispatched a male sparrow.

On 5/02 I recorded more nesting material with no feathers, but on 5/03 I trapped and dispatched a female sparrow. On 5/08 and 5/16 a completed bluebird nest was there but no eggs. On 5/23 the nest box was taken over by sparrows; I dispatched a male sparrow shortly. Obviously the sparrow removed the bluebird eggs deposited the two weeks previously. Then on 5/24 I trapped and dispatched another male sparrow. On 5/29 bluebirds were present and guarding their territory. Success at last!

These bluebirds had five eggs present on 6/08 and 6/19, young hatchlings on 6/28 and 7/05, and on 7/13 the hatchlings had fledged. They aggressively protected their nest and territory from sparrows and other cavity-nesting competitors, and I wish more bluebirds would display that kind of hostile attitude

toward intruders.

Then a new bluebird nest start appeared on 7/23, and on 8/04 I found three sparrow eggs in the new bluebird nest cup with a few long grasses placed vertical above the bluebird nest. I assumed the normal nesting season was over so I removed the sparrow eggs and all nesting material to prepare for next season. No further nesting activity occurred. And I know the location of a sparrow that is first on my list for elimination.

I have never experienced that many sparrow attacks on a single house, and these observations are pretty convincing to me that neither the K-type entry nor the Plexiglas strip discourage these sparrows from using this bluebird nest box. I plan to continue to avoid sparrow problems by placing boxes further from active farming operations, and to trap and dispatch those individuals that range into prime bluebird habitat.