

Ernie and Burt!

By Signe & Ken Onsrud

Since moving to Egg Harbor in 2006 we have had some marvelous experiences with bluebirds, but nothing can compare to the summer of 2011. We have been responsible for monitoring 50 bluebird boxes, most made by my husband Ken using scrap boards given by our neighbors who were building a new home in our development.

This summer some strange things were happening. One box had 5 dead chicks in it and another contained a dead clutch of swallows both on the Orchard's Golf Course. When monitoring another day we found a box of 4 with a dead chick about a week old. Oh no, another problem! We waited and watched for some adult activity. NONE! Should we wait another day to see what would happen or remove the chicks? We decided to remove them rather than risk them starving to death. Judging them to be about 1 week old according to their feather formation of sheaths barely filling out, we found one box of Charlotte Lukes' the same development in which to place one of them. That left us 2 which we promptly named Ernie and Burt as their feathers had a decidedly blue cast. Ken bought a can of liver pate cat food with which we mixed raw hamburger. We followed Charlotte's suggestion of cooked egg yolk in the mix. They were hungry little guys and I was kept busy feeding them about every half hour. Here I was out digging worms in my nightgown at 7 in the morning....not a pretty sight! I confiscated one of Ken's watch repair tools, a long skinny forceps, and used that to shove the food down far enough just as the parents do. It worked well alternating worms with the hamburger mixture. Each day we could see changes. They were thriving! When Sunday came I had no other choice but to take them to church so that I could feed them at the proper intervals. People were thrilled to see these cute little ones! Soon they outgrew their home, a little plastic 4x4 container lined with shredded paper towels. At night I had been placing a folded paper towel over them to simulate being covered by mom. They were content and settled down to sleep easily. When they began flipping out of the container their house was changed to a small wastebasket about 12" high. I lined the containers with paper towel on the bottom topped with small pieces of paper towel cut into 1 inch squares to facilitate keeping their quarters clean. All this time we had been searching with Charlotte's help for a box with a small clutch of the same age chicks. At first they did little more than eat and sleep (and poop!) just like a baby. When they became more active I fastened a pliable tree branch in a planter on which they loved to sit and look around. Then they learned that they could hop to a different branch. The next step was flight. Because I was their meal ticket, they would fly to me, crawl up my arms until they were roosting in my hair. And yes, they DID poop in it! We decided after much deliberation to place them separately in 2 boxes of 5 chicks just before they were to fledge. So as not to risk them flying out of the boxes, we went at dusk about the time they settle down to roost for the night covering the hole with a hand to prevent a frightened escape. This was difficult to let these little guys go but knowing it was the



best route for their ultimate survival we simply prayed that God would have His hand in the matter. He who cares for every sparrow that falls surely cares for these sweet birds that were put in our charge. We checked the next day and all were snuggled together. SUCCESS! Within 2 days all dozen had fledged out of both boxes.

This was definitely one of our greatest bird experiences of all times! We will always remember our special time raising Ernie and Burt!