

The Neighborhood House – A New Door Opened



By Bob Tamm

I'm sitting back right now and doing a little reflecting on the years gone by – and for me, that's quite a few now. Like most of us, I've had many good experiences, sprinkled with a few not-so-good ones. I'll take that...

For the last couple decades, bluebirding has become an enjoyable and important part of my life. I have always enjoyed birds – from young on – and, back in the early '80s when I saw my first bluebird, my fascination with *Sialia Sialis* was kick-started. And it hasn't diminished at all!

I think bluebirding in and of itself is as rewarding a pursuit as one could find. After all, we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have helped save this beautiful native North American bird from the brink of extinction - and now we actually see it thriving in many areas, including our home state of Wisconsin! But, once in a while, bluebirding is a catalyst that opens new doors. And recently, a new door was opened for me - the door to the Neighborhood House of Milwaukee, a non-profit organization founded in 1945, which every year helps thousands of at-risk, urban, and inner city children to beat the odds and build for themselves strong futures through various programs – a few of which involve the NH's Nature Center/Outpost in Dodge County, near Neosho, Wisconsin. Here, on their 90-plus acres of mixed woods and prairie, every year, these children and young adults have the opportunity to get away from mundane city life and enjoy various outdoor activities that include, to name only a few: sledding in winter, maple sugaring in March, hiking, camping, gardening, wildlife identification, art classes, science and environmental projects, and – oh yes – we can now add bluebird monitoring to the list!

In Autumn 2009, Melissa Bruder and I took the hour drive north to meet with Jamie Shorts, who is the Nature Center Coordinator and Environmental Educator for Neighborhood House. Jamie is truly the right person for the job! Her enthusiasm, as well as her love for all things natural, is so evident – and

infectious – that the kids with whom she deals on an almost daily basis can't help but to become enthused also! When Jamie asked if B.R.A.W. could help her to create a bluebird trail for her children and her, I was only too happy to oblige - thus, the trip last fall to Neosho to install 10 boxes that would become a brand new activity for the summer day camp students. We had no trouble finding 10 suitable sites for boxes, since a good portion of the land is either open or semi-open prairie. After the trail was finished, I recall telling Jamie that I could guarantee that she and the kids will see more bluebirds next year! As prognosticators go, I'm hardly at the forefront, but this prediction was almost a can't-miss! I have been in contact with Jamie since the trail was installed, and I asked her a while back if it would be possible to meet with her again, preferably during bluebird season, and preferably when children were present. I wanted to see them interact with Jamie, and I also wanted to do a power-point presentation for the children, all of whom were in the 6 to 12 year old range – with most being 9 to 12 years old. And, a bluebird hike to boot would be good, too! So, on July 6th, Melissa and I drove up there again, where we met once more with Jamie, about 30 youngsters, and a few group leaders/chaperones. As we arrived at the Outpost, I couldn't help but think to myself what a unique and wonderful opportunity this was for these city-bound kids to explore the outdoors first-hand in this beautiful setting.

The presentation then was geared for this age group, and I was amazed at their knowledge of the outdoors, already at this tender age! And they knew much about birds too, including cavity nesters and bluebirds! This was, I am sure, in no small part due to the many weeks these kids have spent at the Nature Center. To help hold their attention, I decided to include, as part of the presentation, a test - or contest - in which the children who answered the most questions correctly would be eligible for a drawing. The winner would receive "To Catch the Wind", a wonderful hardbound book



packed with beautiful nature photos from all over North America. (I liked this book so much I bought one for myself also!) I was almost shocked at the excitement and the enthusiasm that the youngsters showed during the session. I remember one slide in which various birds were pictured. To try and “throw them a curve”, I added a picture of the long-extinct Dodo bird. The specimen in the picture was created from fossil remains, and it looked as lifelike as any of the others. As I pointed to different birds, I asked the kids whether they had ever spotted this bird or that bird. Of course, the common birds that I pointed to evoked a loud positive response. The less common birds, predictably, drew a much less boisterous response. Then I pointed to the Dodo bird, and asked my young audience: “And how many of you have ever seen THIS bird?” All was quiet except for one little girl who proudly proclaimed that she thought she saw one just the other day!!!

I used the dodo bird to explain what extinction meant – how the dodo bird’s sad extinction was almost wholly due to man’s thoughtlessness - in the case of the doomed dodo bird, the senseless clubbing of these flightless birds. That was my segue to the story of our bluebirds, who could have experienced a similar fate had it not been for countless thousands of concerned people in the last few decades who constructed nest boxes and created bluebird trails around the continent. I then could explain how necessary it is for us to do our very best to preserve not only our bluebirds, but ALL living things...adding that, unfortunately for many species, it is already too late.

After the presentation, we gathered the answer sheets, and put the “finalists” names into a hat, from which the prize winner was drawn. Happily, it went to Mickaella White, age 10, one of a group of “key” young people involved with the bluebird trail. I had the opportunity to talk with her and two other key people: Nina Blade, age 9, and Zerri Knox, age 11. It goes without saying that they all have enjoyed Neighborhood House activities for years now, including two – Zerri and Nina - who were enrolled already as infants in N.H.’s Early

Childhood Services. Mickaella and Nina both very much enjoy bluebird monitoring and hiking. Zerri added that she also really likes Art class – which in this current season focuses on Bird Art, while last year the theme was Native American Art. She added that she also had fun helping build forts made mostly from sticks and grass. (Don’t laugh... some of these structures have been standing for years!) All three girls also mentioned that they enjoyed winter sledding, the maple sugaring in March, and “Slip-N-Sliding” on hot summer days.

Speaking of hot summer days, the day we were there – July 6th – was just that! Hot, in the low nineties, high humidity, and not much breeze. Perfect weather for another species of wildlife, namely mosquitos. Nevertheless, a bunch of us brave souls hiked the bluebird trail – at least partially – and we were rewarded with seeing a good number of bluebirds, adults and young. I even let a couple of gals hold a nestling in their hands... a first for them! The trail is doing very well for the first year, with five of the ten boxes occupied by bluebirds, the other five by tree swallows, as of this writing. And, happily, house sparrows are a non-issue here. I found one box with a bluebird nest and no eggs, but on the ground below the box was a pierced egg, courtesy of a house wren. We have tried to minimize the presence of house wrens by placing the boxes in very open areas, and Jamie mentioned that she sees few wrens in the bluebird areas – a good thing...

So, all in all, this unique trail is doing

quite well. Not only is it helping bluebirds to become more visible every day at the Nature Center, but it is also helping some special young children to have a more balanced perspective towards our wildlife – and Nature as a whole. I am thankful that this passion of ours – bluebirding – has over the years been responsible for new doors being opened to me - doors that enabled me to see new places, to meet new people, and to make new friends. I can happily add the Neighborhood House of Milwaukee, its Nature Outpost in Neosho, and Jamie and the kids to my growing list.

You can learn more about the Neighborhood House of Milwaukee by visiting their website at: www.nh-milw.org

