

Bluebird Trail and Observations on County Line Lake

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2010 turned out to be a very successful and enlightening year for me with my small bluebird trail both at the cabin in Birchwood Wisconsin as well as my home in Minneapolis MN. Let me start with my successes and observations in Birchwood, which proved this year to be very educational on bluebird pair bonding as well as overall behavior and interactions between birds.

For the sole purpose of identifying the birds and their specific interactions with each other, I'll refer to them as female #1, male #1 etc..

The second week of April female #1 and her mate (male #1) appeared on my property and within several days proceeded to build a nest. The nest was started in a Peterson style box about 500 feet from the cabin, but then for no apparent reason to me, the female moved about 25 feet over and into a Gilbertson PVC house, evicting a chickadee that was in the process of also building a nest. After a few finishing touches, this bluebird nest contained a total of 5 eggs. Interesting was that the chickadee then moved into the Peterson box and built her nest on top of the nest already started by this female bluebird.

Prior to nest completion and incubation, this particular pair of bluebirds would fly up to the cabin several times a day to feed on mealworms which I was offering to them in a shallow dish. When female #1 started incubating, male #1 would fly back and forth with mealworms to feed her. During the first week of incubation, another single female (#2) appeared on the scene and claimed a Peterson box located right off the back deck of the cabin. She was alone for several days while she proceeded to build her nest. Interesting was that male #1 then left female #1 and mated with female #2 staying with her into the first week of incubation. During this time female #2 would defend the area from female #1 who made several attempts to try and come back in the

area to feed on mealworms. To my surprise, after the first nest initiated by female #1 hatched, male #1 abandoned female #2 and went back to help feed the young from the first nest with his original mate (female #1).

About 8 days into incubation of the nest of female #2, a different male (#2) appeared on the scene and was very flirtatious with female #2. He constantly flew to other houses "wing waving" as if trying to get her to immediately mate with him, but she remained loyal to her nest. He was very curious about her active nest but never once entered the house or fed her while she was incubating. Also interesting was that male #2 never once even made a single attempt to help feed these young sired by male #1 while they were inside the nest box. Female #2 had the sole role in feeding these 5 young and amazingly all successfully fledged. What I found even more interesting was that immediately after fledging, male #2 took over the role of feeding these young, while female #2 started building nest number two in a Gilbertson style box about 100 feet from this nest she just fledged. Meanwhile, female #1 and male #1 were also on their second nest located in the Gilbertson house where they fledged 5 chicks from the first attempt. While female #2 was incubating her second nest, another single female (#3) showed up on the scene and showed great interest in a Gilbertson box located about 50 feet from the Peterson box where female #2 recently fledged her 5 chicks. Female #2 was still defending this area somewhat aggressively, possibly due to the food source (mealworms) more than anything since she was now on nest number two located about 100 feet away from her first nest. Several times I watched as female #2 fought with and tried to drive off female #3 who was extremely persistent on trying to claim this specific Gilbertson box. Ultimately female #3 won the battle and staked her claim on the nest site, establishing a very distinct territorial boundary with female #2 which was marked by the driveway into the property. Female number #3 was very submissive to male #2 and ultimately convinced him to copulate with her and the result was a nest with 3 eggs. Afterwards, male

#2 went back to his duty of feeding the young sired by male #1 that were still present as well as tending to female #2 on her second nest. He never showed any other interest in helping female #3 with her nest. Female #3 incubated and fledged 3 chicks solely on her own without any help from male #2. Even after these young left the nest box, I never witnessed male #2 or female #2 again in the area. Apparently they had left for greener pastures elsewhere. I found all of this behavior extremely interesting as well as educational. Not only did I find the interaction between specific birds educational but also the fact that some of these boxes were closer than the recommended 150-300 yards apart. Could it be that the habitat is heavily wooded with only sparse open space and shoreline, resulting in the birds not being able to visually see each other as easily? I guess only they know the answer to that for sure.

Another interesting observation and a first time to ever witness such an event I might add, was the tight social bond a bluebird family had here in my backyard in Minneapolis MN. The first nest attempt in early April, resulted in 4 eggs and 4 chicks successfully fledging around the second week of May. Around the first week of June, nest number 2 was initiated and contained 5 eggs. The chicks from nest number 1 remained with the parent the entire time during incubation of nest number 2. I was also feeding these birds mealworm (and superworms which they actually prefer) so I'm sure this contributed to their bonding to the site.

After the second nest hatched, all 4 young from the first nest proceeded to help feed and raise the young from nest number 2. They entered the box with food as much as if not more than the adults and also helped feed the young after they fledged. I have heard of this observation before but as I stated have never witnessed myself until this year. My only major regret is that I did not take video of this event.

I can only hope that in spring I see similar if not better results in the number of birds produced as well as additional and exciting new observations of these beautiful songbirds!