

## Celebrating 35 Years With BRAW



**By Carol McDaniel** Congratulations to all of the bluebirders over the years that have been a part in BRAW's accomplishment of achieving 35 years of successful Eastern Bluebird management.



Bluebirds have been a focus of mine since 1977 when my husband's aunt, Ruth Reinoehl, who was an avid birder, read an article in National Geographic written by Larry Zeleny, founder of the North American Bluebird Society (NABS), titled, "Song of Hope for the Bluebird" and passed it on to me. The article explained the troubles that the Eastern Bluebirds were having with dwindling numbers and talked about ways the average citizen could help "bring the bluebird back".

In 1979, I saw my first bluebird at Yellowstone Lake State Park near Blanchardville, WI. In 1980, I discovered a pair of bluebirds nesting in the box in our backyard with four baby bluebirds. It was a Rubbermaid box that my husband bought for me and was tacked on top of a wooden fence post. I remember the shock of finding the dead parent birds laying on the grass below the box and the four nestlings chirping inside anxious for a meal. Not knowing what to do, I telephoned Larry Zeleny and he explained, "Keep them warm and feed them cutup worms every twenty minutes from dawn to dusk."

My family got into the act and we dug worms from the garden and searched trees for tent caterpillars. We cut up the worms and fed them with tweezers. A heating bulb kept the babies warm. We thought water would be good, so we gave them drops of water. In a few days, the first baby died, then another, one fledged, and the last was eighteen days old when it died.

Discouraged, our teenage daughter Christine wrote a letter to Dr. Zeleny to see if he could tell us what happened. She told him we had given the nestlings drops of water. He wrote back and explained that little birds get all the water they need from the insects and the water would have gone into their lungs and killed them. In 1981, Ruth called me again, "If you get some local, interested people together, Carol, I will buy some nest box kits from NABS, and you can give them away at the meeting."

I enjoyed seeing birds but knew very little about them, including the Eastern Bluebird. Our children were young and learning about bluebirds sounded like a good nature project to get them involved in, so I agreed, and our first meeting was to be held in March of 1981. Soon, my husband, John, our four children and I invited the community to join us for a meeting aimed at helping the bluebirds. About fifteen people came and we started the Lafayette County Bluebird Society. We handed out 39 nest boxes and they were installed in the rural areas of Darlington. Word spread and more people became involved.

In 1986, I read in a local paper that the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (BRAW) had formed and was looking for members. I joined and started receiving their newsletter. I read it from front to back and was fascinated with the information. There were few bluebirds fledged in those days and raising them was a challenge. BRAW asked members to report to them about their bluebird trails. I hiked my bluebird trail once a week; often taking my six-year-old daughter, Tammy, with me. She loved seeing the bluebirds fly from the boxes and would peek inside at the little ones.

Soon, I became a BRAW county coordinator for Lafayette County and, eventually, board member and county coordinator chair. Later, I served as BRAW president. I am still checking my boxes once a week during the nesting season and reporting to BRAW.

BRAW has been the go-to organization for all bluebirders in Wisconsin for thirty-five years. In the first year, BRAW got funding help from DNR's Bureau of Endangered Resources. After that, they provided printing, mailing and computer help. BER Liaison Mike Mossman helped by developing a list of bluebirders and organizing the first

meeting. The title of the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (BRAW) was decided on. Mike pointed out that BRAW is an acronym for the Scottish term and variant of “brave” meaning; “fine, well-dressed, excellent.”

In the first issue of Wisconsin Bluebird dated June 1986, he wrote, “The effects of this program will be far reaching, not only by increasing bluebird populations, but by better acquainting Wisconsin with the ‘gem of blue’ and with the creatures and landscapes that are encountered in the process.”

BRAW accomplished this in many ways. One was by providing an excellent newsletter and regularly revised information packet filled with detailed information on everything one needs to know to have a successful bluebird trail.

Published in the newsletter were studies and research projects that BRAW was undertaking, such as: recommended methods to combat black flies; box pairing studies that concluded placing boxes farther apart than 100 yards increased bluebird production; and a deep vs. shallow box study resulted in recommending the shallow box. As a result of these methods, the Eastern Bluebird numbers have gradually increased and have, in recent years, fledged young in Wisconsin in the tens of thousands.

The Annual Meetings were attended by bluebirders from all counties of Wisconsin, as well as members from outside of the state, allowing us to get acquainted with other bluebirders. Each meeting showcased speakers on the topic of bluebirds and other nature subjects of the day. Expert information was given by experienced members at the Bluebird Roundtable. The meetings were well attended and enjoyed by everyone.

For several years, BRAW has had a booth at the Garden Expo in Madison where folks can take information home with them about how to have a successful bluebird trail. This has been another way to get to know budding and experienced bluebirders throughout the state and get them started in the organization.

The county coordinator program has been active since BRAW’s early days. Nearly every county in Wisconsin has had a volunteer county coordinator who has been there to answer questions and promote BRAW. Many exciting and fun stories have been told by county coordinators as they encountered experiences and challenges from other bluebirders.

Many wonderful, dedicated people have taken the challenge to run and promote the BRAW organization. Some that stand out in my mind are:

- Don Bragg, BRAW’s first newsletter editor and photographer for many years.
- Mary Rather, first County Coordinator Chair who was known to say when meetings got testy, “Don’t let your undies get in a bundle.”
- Delores Wendt, BRAW’s first treasurer, who lobbied Governor Earl to proclaim Wisconsin’s first Bluebird Week.
- Fred Craig, a board member who built countless NABS style boxes for BRAW members.
- Joe O’Halloran who led the way in nest box pairing research and was the designer of the Simple nest box.
- Andrew Nelson, Verlyn Olson, Herman Olson, Vince Bauldry, and Del Parkinson who were among the many nest box designers.
- Joe Schultz, past president of BRAW.
- Lowell Peterson and Mary Hollebeck, working together to get our youth involved with bluebirds.
- Leif Marking, who’s excellent blue bird trail monitoring is an inspiration to all of us;

- Patrick Ready, past BRAW president and newsletter editor, who has enhanced many issues with his own excellent bluebird photos.

It pleases me to think back and reminisce about what has been accomplished in the BRAW organization since its beginning in 1986 and to recall the fine people who became friends of mine and my husband's. We can all be proud to say we have rubbed shoulders with Wisconsin bluebirders.