



Bluebird News



An Affiliate of NABS

Sustaining Bluebirds For Future Generations

Volume 35 Issue 4

Fall 2025

Peterson Bluebird Nest Box



A Peterson bluebird nest box in Frontenac State Park. Photo by Jacob Gaster, undated; used with permission.

Creator: Marjorie Savage, MNopedia © Minnesota Historical Society

First Published: October 15, 2025, Reprinted with permission.

The Eastern bluebird, indigenous to North and Central America, is said to have once been as common as the American robin. A population decline starting in the early twentieth century reduced the number of Eastern bluebirds by an estimated 90 percent, inspiring a grassroots movement to save them. Key to the movement's success was the Peterson bluebird nest box, designed by Dick and Vi Peterson of Brooklyn Center.

Eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) have a long history in North America, with mitochondrial DNA research suggesting the birds evolved into a distinct species about 2.5 million years ago. Fossil evidence dates the birds' presence in the upper Midwest at 8,000 to 10,000 years ago, around the end of the last glacial period. The stories of many Native American cultures recognize bluebirds as symbols of spring and bearers

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of hope, friendship, and happiness. Minnesota Ojibwe called (and still call) the bluebird ozhaawashko-bineshiinh (blue bird). The corresponding word in the Dakota language is ziqtkathō.

Eastern bluebirds are secondary cavity nesters, meaning they build their nests in previously hollowed-out spaces. Although they require a sheltered nook for nesting, bluebirds can't drill cavities with their beaks. In nature, they nest in other birds' abandoned roosts, hollow rock niches, wooden fencepost notches, and dead or dying trees.

As American settlement expanded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, those natural nesting options dwindled. Logging removed woodlands, and metal fenceposts replaced wooden ones. Pesticides and insecticides killed the birds and the insects they fed on. Most devastating was the incursion of two European cavity nesters: the house sparrow (English sparrow) and the common starling (European starling). These non-native species invaded bluebird nests, killing off adult birds and their fledglings.

By the 1960s, the nation's Eastern bluebirds faced extinction, and a decade later the birds were on the National Audubon Society's list of "vanishing species." Bird lovers throughout the United States searched for ways to reestablish the bluebird population, recognizing that recovery would require human intervention.

Minnesotans Dick and Vi Peterson joined the search, focusing their efforts on finding a substitute for nesting

Peterson Bluebird Nest Box continued...

cavities. They lined “bluebird trails” with nearly 500 nest boxes, checking weekly during nesting season to identify elements that would keep the chicks warm, dry, and safe from pests.

Every component of the Peterson nest box focused on protecting the birds. A wide roof provided shade on a hot summer day and shelter from wind, rain, and snow in inclement weather. The steep slant of the roof prevented raccoons and house cats from snatching the babies inside. The wedge shape of the box made it easier for fledglings to leave the nest when they were ready. An entry hole, measured to the sixteenth of an inch, was sized to keep starlings out.

The Petersons shared their nest-box pattern with individuals and conservation groups at no charge and led workshops teaching the construction process. Children built the boxes in 4H clubs, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Camp Fire Girls. Junior and senior high school students constructed Peterson boxes in shop class or as Future Farmers of America. Civic groups established bluebird trails in parks and on golf courses, at cemeteries, and along country roads. Volunteers took notes, recording when a nest was built; what kind of bird built it; when eggs were laid; and how many chicks hatched.

The Peterson nest box worked. Although a 1979 spot

check of Minnesota bluebirds revealed just eleven pairs, a bird census three years later showed a count of 1,490 fledglings. In 1992, 14,800 fledglings were counted in Minnesota, more than any other state in the nation. Nationally, researchers reported that Eastern bluebirds showed a preference for Peterson boxes when they were given a choice of nesting sites.

Dick Peterson, described as a “tinkerer,” built and tested more than 5,000 nest boxes between 1978 and 1998. A retired Northwest airline pilot, David Ahlgren, simplified Peterson’s design and developed a method for constructing an entire nest box from just one board. He then spent twenty-five years cutting out more than 85,000 nest boxes and selling them to birders around the world or donating them to schools and non-profit groups.

Over time, the efforts of countless volunteers stabilized Minnesota’s bluebird population, with bird census reports averaging just over ten thousand fledglings a year. In 2025, the Bluebird Recovery Program of Minnesota dropped “recovery” from its name, noting that the bluebird population has recovered.

<https://www3.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/thing/peterson-bluebird-nest-box>

Editors Corner by Virginia Windschitl

In the Summer issue of the Bluebird News, we featured an article about Ryan Rudolph and his passion for building Peterson style bluebird nest boxes in memory of his wife. It was a human interest and healing article not meant to endorse a specific type of nest box. BBPMN features plans for five different nest boxes on its website, again, we do not recommend one type over another. We leave it to bluebird landlords to decide which nest box works best for their yard or trail. For those of you interested in the nest boxes we do feature, but not endorse, here is a link to the nest box page on our website, <https://bbpmn.org/nest-box-informational/>

We enjoyed visiting with the general public and bluebirders at our

Bluebird Extravaganza at Fluegels in Rosemount in September. We had great weather for the event. Thanks to Fluegel’s for letting us set up our trailer in their parking lot.

Mike Shuda, a Rice County coordinator in Faribault was there with his wife Stacy selling Gilbertson PVC nest boxes. Keith Radel and BBPMN board members were there to answer questions about bluebirds and they mended a few nest boxes.

The family of Ron Guck stopped in. It is great to hear that his family is carrying on monitoring his trails in the Hastings area after his passing in October 2024.

Looking back, I see that my first issue as editor was Winter 2016 so this issue finishes up 10 years of putting together the Bluebird News

for BBPMN. I was first working with Faribault Printing and Milo Larson, and now the last two years with Cornerstone Copy in downtown Lakeville and the great staff there that handle the layout and mailing. Thanks to everyone who has contributed articles, photos and ideas to help make this publication possible.

If you go to the U of M Landscape Arboretum’s Winter Lights event, <https://arb.umn.edu/winterlights>. Look for our BBPMN decorated tree there!

At a recent board meeting we approved adding Jonathan Willow (who was featured in the Summer issue) to our board.

Forestry Field Day Highlights Educational Trail by Mary Bailey



Bill Bailey leads an informative, leisurely hike for the Forestry Field Day.

On Wednesday, July 30, 2025, over 70 people gathered in Chatfield for the 15th Annual Forestry Field Day, sponsored by the Fillmore County Soil and Water Conservation District. This year's theme was "Public Trails on Private Land."

After a light supper and fellowship, Bill Bailey led an interpretive hike on part of the Lost Creek Hiking Trail – the Bill Bailey Forestry Loop – which he created shortly after Covid hit. As an avid forester, he was doing timber stand improvement (easy to isolate during a pandemic and still remain active) and noticed that hikers, especially families, were hiking part of the trail and doubling back, reluctant or unable to do the

complete six-plus miles of the full trail. Having experienced loop trails at national parks, he thought this was an opportunity to add to the existing trail. He consulted with the Bluff Country Hiking Club, and they gave him their support upon being shown the location and length of the new trail. He installed interpretive signs to illustrate good

forestry practices, and the section was added to the map provided for hikers.

This forestry field day marks the fifth one held on Bailey land and adds the bonus of being open to the public to enjoy. All forestry field days are narrated and offer information and opportunities for questions. They typically are not strenuous to walk and have a leisurely pace. This one included a handout of forestry practices, with the added bonus of other professionals such as a professional forester, representatives of the proposed Minnesota Driftless Hiking Trail, Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center, the Bluebird Program of MN, and the

Lost Creek Hiking Trail. You can find more information about this public hiking trail which is open year round except for deer gun hunting season by visiting the hiking club's website at www.bluffcountryhikingclub.org.



Participants gather for the hike at the 15th Annual Forestry Field Day at the Bill Bailey Forestry Loop of the Lost Creek Hiking Trail.



Youngest participant, four month old August Wheeler in his leaf-themed sleeper.

Bluebirds Know Good Habitat by Mary Bailey



Some might say beginners' luck; we know better. Bluebirds just know good habitat and comfy nestboxes. This best explains the outstanding success of two new sites at the home of Sterling and Jen Bud of Chatfield, located on that magic strip of Olmsted County Road 136. Boxes placed along their driveway well into last year's season were productive, but the two sites produced two nestings of five bluebirds each for a total of twenty bluebirds this season. This is remarkable for new sites, and heartening for the neighborhood.

Sterling and Jen Bud of rural Chatfield with one of their very successful bluebird boxes.

Project FeederWatch



Project FeederWatch

During the long darker months of the year you can turn your love of birdwatching and feeding birds into scientific discoveries. Project FeederWatch is a community science project organized by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada. Thousands of people across North America help gather data on over 100 species of birds that spend their winters on the continent.

FeederWatch is a November-April survey of birds. As a participant you would make lists of the birds you see at a bird feeder, nature center, bird-friendly garden or water feature and submit those lists online. It's that simple. While most people focus on birds coming to bird feeding stations, you don't even need a feeder! All you need is one specific area from which you like to watch birds. Plus, the schedule is completely flexible: you can count every week or once all winter, for as much or as little time as you like. Specific guidelines are listed on their website.

When you join FeederWatch you will receive:

- Tools to track and learn about your birds on their website or mobile app
- A year-end summary, [Winter Bird Highlights](#)
- A double-sided poster of eastern and western common feeder birds (optional)
- Their calendar (optional)
- Digital access to the Cornell Lab's Living Bird magazine (U.S. participants)

There is an annual participation fee of \$18 for U.S. residents. Why is there a fee? The Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada are non-profit organizations supported primarily by participant and membership fees. Project FeederWatch would not be possible without the support of participants, both scientifically and financially. The fees cover website and database maintenance, data analysis, participant support, printing and shipping project materials, and dissemination of information learned from the data collected. FeederWatch staff constantly seek other sources of funding, but without participant fees, the project would have to shut down. Wild Birds Unlimited has been a sponsor since 2016 and some grant funding has helped with special projects.

Registered FeederWatchers also have a chance to win prizes!

You might think an activity so simple couldn't possibly make a difference. But the data from Project FeederWatch have already helped sound the alarm about declines in bird species, track the spread of disease among wintering bird flocks, and note shifts in the ranges of bird species throughout the colder months.

The website emphasizes that reporting all birds seen is important. "FeederWatch participants often believe that the Lab is not interested in gathering data about the same old birds, especially when the birds are "just" doves or sparrows or starlings. The Lab needs counts of all birds—as well as reports of no birds—to be able to monitor population trends over time. Please send in your counts, no matter how small or ordinary."

They strive to ensure that Project FeederWatch is accessible and welcoming to every person. FeederWatch is conducted by people of all skill levels and backgrounds, including children, families, individuals, classrooms, retired persons, youth groups, nature centers, and bird clubs. A common misconception about the field of science is that only highly trained professionals can engage in research and data analysis. But in fact, with the right guides, citizen scientists can be an incredible asset to the scientific community. Through efforts like Project FeederWatch, we can become the eyes and ears of bird conservation.

For more information go to their website:

<https://feederwatch.org/>

Here's Looking at you!



Photo by Mike DeBruhl
1st Vice President for Affiliate Relations
North American Bluebird Society

Marilyn Suter Thank You by Nancy Engel



In September, Marilyn Suter announced that she was retiring from the board of the Bluebird Program of Minnesota. We want to thank her for her many years of service to our group and wish her well. We will miss her advice and insight as we begin our new chapter as the Bluebird Program of Minnesota.

Many of you may know a bit about our history being a part of the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis (AOM) from 1978-2019. It was Marilyn who spearheaded the process of breaking away from AOM to become an independent nonprofit. She engaged a lawyer to craft the articles of incorporation, filed that paperwork with both the MN Secretary of State and the Federal government and represented us at AOM meetings to keep them informed of our decision to become independent. That effort took almost a year, but Marilyn persisted and as a result, we are the group that we are today.

In addition to this work, Marilyn has also served on the board as Secretary, Treasurer and an advisor to new board members. David Schmidt credits Marilyn for providing him and the other board members with “sage advice” and for asking “the right questions when needed.”

Through her work with the board, Marilyn helped shepherd in a new era of independence for our group and has been a strong advocate for our beloved bluebirds. Marilyn’s one wish for us is that we “never fold” and “keep going” in our mission to maintain healthy populations of bluebirds. On behalf of the board, I promise we will honor that wish, Marilyn. Thank you again for everything you have done.

“Marilyn’s one wish for us is that we “never fold” and “keep going” in our mission to maintain healthy populations of bluebirds.”



Become a Member!



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www.nabluebirdsociety.org

Visit Us Online For

- Fact Sheets
- Events
- Nestbox Plans
- Speakers
- Tips/Guidance
- And more!

MISSION:

To engage in such educational, scientific and charitable pursuits as may be beneficial to the prosperity and well being of the three species of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting bird species.

NABS was founded in 1978 by Dr. Lawrence Zeleny in order to promote the preservation of bluebirds, a cavity-nesting species in decline. Larry, with the support of his wife, Olive dedicated much of his life to providing nestboxes and managing bluebird trails. He promoted bluebird conservation through hundreds of talks and articles in many periodicals.

NABS’ core mission is education, conservation and research, to mirror the life of Dr. Zeleny. His book, *The Bluebird: How You Can Help Its Fight for Survival* is a testament to what he called, the “symbol of love, hope and happiness,” the bluebird.

To learn more about the history of NABS, visit <https://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/nabs-history/>

2025 Trail Reports

Tidbits

Comparing 218 person to person, 2024 to 2025, trail reports we are dead even for number of chicks fledged at 3.12 per-site for both years. In 2024 – 2680 sites fledged 8374 chicks, so far in 2025 – 2703 sites have reported fledging 8439 chicks.

We have received numerous comments on losing chicks and adults during the rainy period in mid-May. Too much rain over too long of a period, adults were unable to find insects for themselves and chicks.

In 2024 we received 326 reports. With just over a month remaining to submit your 2025 reports, if you haven't, please do so as soon as you can.

Here's the link to our Reporting webpage, <https://bbpmn.org/2025-trail-reporting-forms/>.

When is National Bird Day?

National Bird Day is observed every year on January 5. This date marks the end of the annual Christmas Bird Count, a long-standing citizen science tradition in North America. While the event is most prominent in the United States, it is supported globally by individuals and organizations committed to bird protection and biodiversity.

Public Lands Nest Box Program

The Bluebird Program of Minnesota to further its mission of "Education and Outreach" is offering to nature centers, preserves, schools, city, county/regional and state parks with established and supervised bluebird programs, the opportunity to apply for a donation of new nest boxes for expansion or replacements on their Bluebird trail(s). Please note requests are limited to 10 boxes per year per institution, a total of 50 boxes will be given away per year. All nest boxes given out will be Gilbertson – PVC boxes.

Applications will be accepted **until February 1st** of each year with nest boxes being distributed on an annual basis in March to those facilities chosen by the **Bluebird Program** – Public Lands Nest Box Program application review committee.

Trail Report Comparison as of November 6th, 2025		
	2024	2025
Sites	2680	2703
Chicks Fledged	8374	8439

Bluebird Program of MN Membership Enrollment & Renewal

A Bluebird Program of Minnesota membership includes - an initial Information packet containing a full color Trail Guide and Top Ten Tips to Successful Bluebirding, the latest BBPMN's quarterly newsletter and a 'See How Chicks Grow' color sheet. Consultation and advice are available by phone, text, e-mail or in the field. Your membership fee is tax deductible. You can contact us at info@bbpMN.org. Please note there will be no refunds and memberships are not transferable to another person or organization.

_____ New Member _____ Renewal

Membership Periods Are:

2 years _____ \$30.00 5 years _____ \$60.00 Lifetime _____ \$175.00

Name _____ Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ County _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Please indicate how you'd like to receive the BBPMN quarterly Newsletter ___ via email or ___ via USPS.

If giving a membership as a gift, please enter your name below so the recipient can be aware of your generosity:

Please mail form and payment to:

BBPMN c/o Brianna Frisch, 11018 Taylor Hill Road, Minnieska, MN 55910

Need help or have suggestions? Call your County Coordinator!

If you are an active bluebirder, and would like to donate some of your time to help others help the bluebirds, the BBMN is looking for more county coordinators. If interested, email us at info@bbpmn.org for more information.

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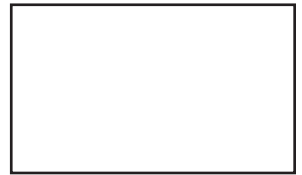
Bluebird Program of Minnesota



5294 W 235th St.
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Volume 35 Issue 4
Fall 2025

Sustaining Bluebirds For Future Generations



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Bluebird News is published quarterly by the
Bluebird Program of Minnesota
www.bbpmn.org
BBPMN is a 501 (C)(3) Organization
Membership qualifies as a tax-deductible donation.
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UPCOMING EVENTS

January 5, 2026
National Bird Day

Saturday, April 11, 2026
Bluebird Expo

May 8-10, 2026
Horicon Marsh Bird Festival
Marsh Haven Nature Center, WI

May 14-16, 2026
Festival of the Birds
Detroit Lakes, MN

Our Mission:
"To encourage, inspire, educate and assist individuals and organizations to become actively involved in the restoration and preservation efforts to sustain a healthy and expanding population of bluebirds and other native cavity nesters."



Photos by Doris Glander

Thank you to everyone who wrote articles or provided photographs for this publication of the Bluebird News.