

Metropark Men Have Hearts for Bluebirds

by Beth Peterson

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For the last 20 years, two virile men have had a soft place in their hearts for the pretty, little bluebirds in the Cleveland Metroparks. Having escaped near extinction in the 1950s and 60s, bluebirds have made a comeback due in part to the efforts of volunteers like Joe Wojnarowski and Lou Gardella.

Both men hold permits through the Cleveland Metroparks to check and maintain park bluebird boxes.

Gardella keeps watch over 25 boxes at Sleepy Hollow Golf Course, which borders the Brecksville Reservation.

Wojnarowski works in a remote park area along the Buckeye Trail, south of the Parkview Road Trail and west of Riverview Road. There are currently 16 boxes there on what was the old Gynn property in the Cuyahoga Valley. "Joe and Lou work very hard to maintain the (bluebird) boxes," said Dave Devorak, volunteer coordinator and bird expert at Brecksville Nature Center. Their duties include constructing new nest boxes and mounting them on poles; cleaning out boxes after the birds are finished nesting; keeping track of what bird species are nesting in each of the numbered boxes; and keeping statistics like the number of eggs hatched each year. Gardella and Wojnarowski turn in year-end reports to the Metroparks each fall for monitoring purposes.

Gardella got into the bluebird "business" in the fall of 1986 when a young boy scout needed help with his merit badge project. Gardella installed his first boxes the next February. Not an easy job, pounding post holes into the hard winter ground, but necessary to ensure that new homes will be ready and waiting when the bluebirds returned from migrations to southern states like Mississippi, Georgia and Florida.

Bluebirds are not Gardella's only "outdoor" interest. He is active in observing, photographing and documenting dragonflies for the Ohio Odonata Survey; butterflies; and hawks for the Raptor Survey. He said he encourages everyone to participate in these surveys by getting involved. For information on dragonflies, log onto their web site: www.ohiodonata.com.

Wojnarowski's bluebird interest began when he attended the Sportsman Show in the early 80s and picked up a pamphlet, *Hit the Trail for Bluebirds*, put out by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. He solicited area parks for help and the Metroparks agreed to take on the project. He received a license to band bluebirds in the 1980s after working under Marie Morgan, who was federally licensed to tag bluebirds and worked in Summit County Metroparks.

"When I got the first nesting pair, it definitely hooked me," Wojnarowski exclaimed.

He began taking his kids along on his weekly rounds. "I just threw them in a backpack and off we'd go," he said. It became a tradition and now Corey, 15, and Caitlyn, 7, go along whenever possible. "Caitlyn gets mad if I don't take

her with me," he added.

Wojnarowski continues to maintain the original 16 nest boxes he put up 20 years ago. It is a constant battle to keep out invaders like mice trying to stay warm in the winter. One year he even found that flying squirrels, which are nocturnal creatures had taken up residence in one of the boxes.



Lou Gardella checks "his" bluebird houses on a regular basis. Photo by J.P. Baraona

Last summer he replaced all 16 boxes and poles because the poles were rusty which allowed predators to climb up to the boxes.

"I painted them with stain and must have made them too nice," he said, "since someone stole one of them this spring." Undaunted, Wojnarowski said it was worth it. "I enjoy it, my kids like it, and I plan to do this as long as I'm able."

According to Devorak, European house sparrows are invading the bluebird boxes this year. Gardella's boxes at the golf course are plagued with sparrows.

"It's become an increasing problem," he said, "and more and more of a pain in the neck."

Part of the job of maintaining the boxes includes policing them for nests of invading sparrows.

European house sparrows are one of the bluebird's main predators, along with raccoons, snakes, and European starlings. Like starlings, house sparrows were a European import, and are now classified as a pest, therefore

not protected by law.

This year's cool, wet spring has not helped matters for bluebirds. While it may be fortunate for humans, the inclement weather has delayed the growth of insect populations, the birds' main food source.

"Without a lot of food, they may build a nest, but won't lay eggs," Gardella said. His boxes currently house only two bluebird families.

Once bluebirds have built their perfectly shaped four-inch-deep nests out of grasses and other fine materials like hair and pine needles, Gardella and Wojnarowski check the boxes weekly, as weather permits, for predators, parasites and leaks. The bluebirds may perch nearby during this process and Gardella will "give them a little chip call and talk to them a little bit.

"I hate to anthropomorphize," he said, "but sometimes I get the feeling when I go out there, that they know me."

Bluebirds are any of a number of North American songbirds of the genus *Sialia*, which have a blue back and reddish-brown breast, and grow to about 7" long, according to the Random House Dictionary. They have a distinctive song and males are more colorful than females. The eastern bluebirds native to this area nest from March or April through August or September, laying several bright blue eggs, one a day, with four to six young reaching maturity.

After laying eggs, pairs may not sit immediately on the eggs, but once they begin, must sit continuously, with incubation taking 12-14 days. Pairs raise two broods a year, on average, in rare instances three, and will even hatch out eggs for other birds through a process called "egg dumping." In this bird behavior, species such as the brownheaded cowbirds fly into nests and leave a batch of eggs for the unsuspecting adoptive parents.

In the late 1950s through the 1960s, bluebirds came close to extinction. Normal nesting sites and habitats were greatly diminished for several reasons. Bluebirds often made nests in woodpecker holes in trees, many of which were lost to deforestation. Another nesting site, hollowed out wooden fence posts, became less common when farmers started using metal posts. With encroaching human populations, the 100 yards of wide-open spaces that bluebirds require around their nesting sites has become increasingly rare.

Even more deadly to the birds and their food source, insects, were the pesticides and herbicides in common use at the time. It was the era of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, which called attention to the harmful effects of DDT and other pesticides and helped bring less harmful chemicals into wider use.

The harsh winters of 1958-60, 1976 and 1978 also created a severe decline in bluebird populations. With a life span of only a few years and the fact that 50 percent of fledglings are lost each year, due in large part to predators, bluebirds had difficulty propagating quickly enough to reestablish the species.

In the '50s and '60s, government agencies such as the Division of Wildlife and environmental groups like the Audubon Society began to step in on behalf of bluebirds. Using advertisements, mailings and displays at state fairs

promoting the manmade bluebird boxes, the government, state schools like Ohio State University, and the Ohio Bluebird Society also helped to save the bluebirds from extinction.

For more information on bluebirds, visit the Ohio Bluebird Society's website at www.bsluebirds.com . To learn more about Cleveland Metroparks visit www.clemetroparks.com.