

Cooperative Nest of 8 Eastern Bluebirds

By Mary Roen

I put up my first Bluebird nest box in 1988, nailing it to a tree in a patch of woods. Unbelievably, a pair of Bluebirds did nest in it, but a house wren destroyed the eggs. I've learned a lot in the 21 years since I placed that first nest box. I didn't have a lot of resources to turn to in those days. Today there are state and national Bluebird associations and conferences, books, and Internet list serves like Bluebird-L through Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Because of what I have learned, I now have all of my boxes mounted on electric conduit/rebar poles in open areas with stovepipe baffles to eliminate mammalian predators. I have had a lot of great experiences with my Bluebird trail of 53 nest boxes, but this year was exceptional.

On May 31, 2008, I monitored a pair of boxes, #11 and #12, in the back of our farm. Box #11 had 3 Bluebird eggs in it, and Box #12 had 2 Bluebird nestlings and 2 unhatched eggs. It was unheard of to have Bluebird nests in each of 2 nest boxes pair 15 feet apart, so I didn't know what was going on, but assumed the box with eggs was abandoned. When I monitored the trail again on 6/7/08, the nestlings and eggs were all gone! The nests were not disturbed, and with the baffles on both poles, I had no idea what happened. The most likely possibility was avian depredation. I removed both nests and when I monitored my trail again on 6/15/08, there were five Bluebird eggs in box #12.

I was on vacation and couldn't monitor again until 6/27/08 when I found 9 Bluebird eggs in box #12! The only way I could explain this, was that two females were laying eggs in the same nest box. Maybe it was a mother and last year's daughter. That might explain why there was no rivalry between the two females. On July 4 there were eight nestlings about 2-3 days old and one infertile egg. I set up my video camera and documented two females and one male Bluebird feeding the nestlings. I could see that the Gilwood nest box was not going to be big enough for eight nestlings, so I built a bigger box, inside dimen-



sions of 7.25" by 6.5" by 9 inches deep. I made two 1.5-inch holes in the front of the box. I thought it would be interesting to see if both holes would be used, maybe at the same time, and I did get pictures of this occurring. I hinged the roof of this box so I could take pictures more easily from the top.

On July 8, I moved the whole nest

with nestlings to the larger box, on the same pole as the smaller box had been, and set up my video camera to be sure the parents would accept the new nest box. It showed that 5 ½ minutes after I moved the nestlings, one of the females flew to the top of the new box, and in less than 8 minutes, went in the box. It took about 19 minutes for the male to enter the new box. They accepted it! The nestlings were well cared for by the three parents. One nestling was smaller and seemed less developed than the others, so I watched it closely and took pictures daily. The picture taking did not disturb the nestlings. I was careful not to stay more than 2 minutes. They sat quietly and "froze" when the top was opened. I put the video camera out by the box on 7/11 and taped the parents feeding the nestlings 46 times in 69 minutes. The "runt" continued to grow quickly, and soon it could hardly be distinguished from its siblings.

On July 18, I checked the box, and six of the eight nestlings had fledged at 17 days of age. The remaining two nestlings fledged the next day, on July 19. I had my motion activated camera set up and did get a few pictures as the last two nestlings were sitting in the holes ready to fledge out in to the big world. It was like they were saying "good-bye" to me. On July 20 when I looked in the box, it was empty. All eight nestlings fledged successfully. As far as I know, this was the first documented case of two females nesting in one nest box. I am leaving the larger 2-hole box up where it is, to see if it is used again next year.

In 21 years, I have never bonded to any nest of Bluebirds as I did to this one. My Bluebird obsession went up several notches and I truly have "empty nest syndrome"! Many people at work, church, and home have followed the progress of these Bluebirds, and so they have increased Bluebird awareness, too.

My hope is that these fledglings survive to come back next year to start a new generation of Bluebirds. This is why Bluebirds get in your heart and never leave. I love happy endings!

Editor's Note: BRAW does not endorse pairing boxes but recognizes individuals choose their own methods. Mary did an exceptional job documenting this unusual event.