

Remembering Joe O'Halloran

By Carol J. McDaniel

Nearly two years ago, on July 5, 2006, the Eastern Bluebirds of Wisconsin lost one of their most passionate supporters, his name was Joseph P. O'Halloran. Joe was a tall, sturdy man with an outgoing, robust personality. I first met him late in the winter of 1994 when Della Clayton, library aide and fellow bluebirder, stepped into my office at the Johnson Public Library in Darlington and told me that a gentleman wished to speak to me about bluebirds. Since, next to my family, there is nothing I'd rather talk about than bluebirds, I accepted the request. After introducing himself, Joe said he was interested in learning how to attract bluebirds and build nestboxes. He said that he and his wife, Joan, were planning to come to the March 20 Lafayette County Bluebird Society (LCBS) meeting that they had seen advertised. He explained that they owned property in the county; that he had recently retired and was looking for something constructive to do with his spare time. He admitted that he knew next to nothing about bluebirds. I gave him an information packet, supplied by the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin (BRAW) and said I looked forward to seeing the both of them at the meeting.

Over fifty people came to that meeting. It was held at the Darlington Community Center. The key speaker was nextbox designer, Andrew Nelson. He demonstrated how difficult it was for raccoons to reach into his Hill Lake nextbox. Joe and many other bluebirder hopefuls left the meeting that day with handfuls of brochures and nextbox plans aimed at attracting and raising the young of Eastern Bluebirds on their properties.

Within days, Joe contacted me to say he had built a few Hill Lake boxes and placed them on his property. A few days later, he called to inform me that he had a male bluebird investigating one of the boxes. In late April, our club held its annual spring bluebird trail hike and Joe was elated to announce that he had bluebird eggs in his nextbox. In November, at the club's fall meeting, he proudly reported



that four bluebirds had successfully fledged from the box he had placed in the spring.

It was evident that Joe had been bitten by the bluebird bug. Now that Joe was a member of the LCBS, he set his sights on increasing the numbers of bluebirds. Joe had a passion for data and statistics.

He became a member of BRAW and he joined the data collection and analysis committee. Each year, BRAW's committee recorded the nestbox data submitted by its members. It was a huge task. To make the analysis of the information easier, Joe volunteered to enter the data onto a recently released computer program, Lotus 1-2-3. I remember Joe's excitement when he created his first reports with the program. "I can make a graph or chart just like that", he told me. "I plug in the numbers and 'boom' it sorts the data"! Regularly, Joe met with me and other LCBS members from the Darlington area, to review and proofread the reports that he prepared. Before retiring, Joe had a career as a "suit and necktie" patent attorney for the Quaker Oats Company.

Now that he was living the rural life in Southwest Wisconsin, he seemed to enjoy dressing down in a plaid flannel shirt and blue jeans for the LCBS meetings and trail hikes. The briefcase he often carried, filled with computer printouts, charts and graphs, was the one item that indicated the professional career that he had left behind. Over the next twelve years, Joe would challenge and unravel some of the accepted methods used by fellow Wisconsin bluebirders. In the 1990's,

the use of deep boxes was a practice most bluebird enthusiasts used on their trials. When the BRAW annual reports were evaluated, it was evident that shallow boxes were more productive for bluebirds. As a result of Joe's findings, many BRAW members replaced their deep boxes with shallow boxes.

He challenged the theory that paired boxes benefit bluebirds. It was a bold move to make in the days when so many bluebirders were actively using this accepted procedure. As members began to unpair boxes, bluebird numbers started to climb. In 2000, BRAW members reported 10,000 bluebirds fledged. Now, BRAW is hoping to tally 30,000 fledglings for 2008.

A multitude of nestboxes that are intended for bluebird use have been designed and used over the years. Joe took the initiative and designed the "Simple Box". It was easy to build, mount and was readily accepted by bluebirds. In my estimation, it is one of the best boxes available today.

Joe O'Halloran came into the world of bluebirds at a time when the danger of losing the species was not as critical as it once was, but the guaranteed safety of the species relied on the dramatic increase in its numbers. Joe was among the many who have given time, energy and materials to make that happen. I thank him for that. Getting to know Joe O'Halloran was a unique privilege for me. He is gone from our midst but his dedicated efforts will continue.