

A Small Trail Success Story

By Ellen Lafouge

We are fortunate to live within a half mile of the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center (SANC), a 185-acre stretch of unspoiled natural land along the shore of Lake Michigan, located 15 minutes north of downtown Milwaukee. Last spring we were given permission to install a small trail of four bluebird nest boxes along SANC's western and eastern grassland loop trails. Since Eastern Bluebirds need a territorial forage area of 1-3 acres of predominantly open habitat to raise their young, the open natural habitat of the Center's restored grassland prairie seemed a promising area to

place the nest boxes. We knew in previous seasons bluebirds had nested in some of the old woodpecker holes at the center, so chances were good they would take readily to nest boxes placed in the grassland areas. We used nest boxes built by the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, of a favored and well tested design that is shallow, narrow and with an oval hole small enough to usually dissuade starlings and cowbirds from entering. The boxes were monitored weekly, starting in early April through the end of August. Monitoring included checking on the status and well-being of the nest, recording nesting data of all cavity nesters who use the boxes, and sending final results (Form 21) to the *Annual Nesting Survey* compiled each year by B.R.A.W.

It didn't take long for the SANC bluebirds to find and claim the



new nest boxes. Despite the cold, wet spring, and proximity to Lake Michigan, by April 25 there was a completed bluebird nest in box #3, and on May 10, (Mother's Day!) it was found to contain five beautiful turquoise blue eggs. A second bluebird nest in box #1, also containing five eggs, was recorded on May 25. Boxes #2 and #4 were claimed by Tree Swallows. All 10 bluebird young from the first nestings fledged successfully.

The SANC blues used boxes #3 and #4 for their second brood nests, each pair laying four eggs this time. Sadly, one of the second nesting attempts ended in failure when the nestlings were found dead at 10 days old, from undetermined causes. But by August 21 a total of 14 young Eastern Bluebirds had fledged from the 4-nest box bluebird trail. Tree Swallows fledged a total of 10 young, and a late-

starter House Wren pair nested in a vacated box at the end of August and successfully raised 4 chicks. Not bad for just 4 nest boxes!

I also monitor a 30-nest box golf course trail, and enjoy both, including their differences. It is interesting to observe bluebirds in the less landscaped and groomed golf course setting, watching them interact in a natural prairie habitat. Due to its proximity to my home I would ride my bike to monitor the Schlitz Audubon trail, and enjoyed hiking the peaceful center trails as I monitored – the exercise and beauty of the haven were benefits in themselves.

Thanks to the restored grassland habitat at the Schlitz Audubon Center, those four nest boxes proved attractive and productive for our treasured Eastern Bluebird and other cavity nesters as well. They show that you don't need a large bluebird trail to successfully support the conservation of our Eastern Bluebird, and that a trail as small as 4 nest boxes can be a win-win situation for both bluebirds and cavity nesting songbirds, as well as the people who establish and monitor them.

Ellen and Jean-Pierre Lafouge monitor the SANC bluebird trail. Ellen is a board member of the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, and the organization's webmaster. They also monitor a 30-nest box bluebird trail at Mee-Kwon Park Golf Course in Ozaukee County. For more information on the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center visit www.sanc.org