Loren Hughes' crusade garners Edgar County recognition as Illinois' top county for fledgling bluebirds.

On the Trail of the Bluebird

Story By Jeanne Townsend Handy
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"Is there any sign of spring quite so welcome as the glint of the first bluebird unless it is his softly whistled song? No wonder the bird has become the symbol for happiness."

—Neltje Blanchan, Birds Worth Knowing, 1917

Since building his first bluebird nest box 14 years ago, Loren Hughes has created 1,006 boxes of his own design.

Bluebirds seem to be part of an idealized remembrance of an earlier era, a feature within a watercolor landscape complete with picturesque barns and meandering gravel lanes. It is hard to imagine such a bird—brilliant in color, pleasant of voice, and gentle of nature—fitting into the sharp-edged, fast-paced present. And, indeed, it has not fared well. Loss of habitat and competition from other species have been the worst of threats causing eastern bluebird populations to drop an estimated 90 percent between the 1920s and 1970s, and there are far too few of us who can claim to have laid eyes on one. But in Paris, Illinois, the bluebird is once again a common sight—thanks to Loren Hughes.

"Bluebird Man" announced a sign at the end of Hughes's driveway, and this was but one indication of the 81-year-old's involvement in the recovery of the eastern bluebird. He greeted me outside his home, decked out for our

excursion in an East Central Illinois Bluebird Society cap and a polo shirt boasting a "Bluebird Man" insignia.

Hughes's commitment to the bluebird's plight began 14 years ago when he found a nest box diagram in a handyman magazine. He built the box, hung it up, and soon saw his first bluebird—ever. By 2006, Loren Hughes would be standing before the annual gathering of the East Central Illinois Bluebird Society, of which he is founder and president, to announce that he had fledged 955 bluebirds in that year alone.

After touring a workshop where Hughes has now constructed 1,006 bluebird houses of his own design, we hopped into his car and set off on a bluebird trail.

"The Bluebird of Happiness long absent from his life, Ned is visited by the chicken of Depression."

—Gary Larson, The Far Side

It is thought that the eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) was as common as the American robin when English settlers first arrived in this country. Of the bluebird, John James Audubon would write: "Full of innocent vivacity, warbling its ever pleasing notes, and familiar as any bird can be in its natural freedom, it is one of the most agreeable of our feathered favorites." In fact, up until the mid-1800s, human activities helped the bluebird thrive. The conversion of forest to pasture and the installation of wooden fence posts along agricultural fields, which would provide additional nest sites for this cavity-seeking species, were an unintentional boon.

Weekly monitoring of bluebird nest boxes is necessary to insure the viability of future eastern bluebird populations.

In the late 19th century, however, introduction of the non-native English house sparrow spelled the beginning of disaster.

"The sparrow's bill can crack the skull of another bird," Hughes told me. The house sparrow is a fierce competitor for the same nesting sites as those sought after by bluebirds, and in their desire to prevail, house sparrows have been known to kill bluebirds, destroy their eggs or push them from their nests.

As the country progressed through the 20th century, the eastern bluebird population faced additional peril in the form of harmful pesticides and habitat loss as agricultural methods changed, metal posts replaced wooden fence posts, and development upon open land increased. By the late 1960s, eastern bluebirds had been placed on the National Audubon Society's Species of Concern list.

But, fortunately for these birds—and for those of us who wish for their society in the midst of ours—bluebirds will readily take up residence in human-made nest boxes. And this is where people like Loren Hughes, a recipient of the 2007 Environmental Hero Award, come in.

Bluebirds usually lay four to five eggs (laying one egg a day), and may have up to three nests in one season.

Nearly ready to fledge—in 2009, Loren Hughes personally fledged 844 bluebirds.

"Only with the construction of bluebird trails, consisting of next boxes erected and monitored for bluebird use, have populations rebounded in recent years."

—Illinois Natural History Survey report, July-August 1996

As we tooled about town from nest box to nest box, Hughes rattled off the schedule he follows from mid March to mid August as he monitors his "bluebird trails": Tuesday—Willow Creek Trail and the golf course; Saturday—City Trail 1; Sunday—the Indiana Trail with 27 boxes between Paris and Terre Haute; and Mondays—City Trail 2, on which he travels over 50 miles to monitor 108 boxes. A trail consists of a minimum of five nest boxes placed at regular intervals. Hughes's routes now include 300 boxes and many miles of driving.

"I think the cops know who I am," he stated.

But it is not enough to set up a trail. The boxes must be monitored. Hughes has obtained permission to place his nest boxes on both public and private property in and around Paris, and at each stop we made he would carefully open the box to reveal nestlings of various ages. Between my exclamations of "Oh my gosh!" as the oversized beaks and scrawny bodies were revealed to me, he explained the importance of box monitoring.

Weekly inspection of a box makes it possible, through examination of the nesting material and eggs, to determine whether another species has taken it over. Other potential problems can be caught early as well. Hughes pulled out a copy of a state map sectioned off by county, which indicated the bluebird numbers reported in 2006. Alongside the outline of Illinois was a caption that read, "Only 30 counties out of 102 reporting—where are the rest?????" with numerous question marks revealing frustration at the lack of reporting.

Within the pages of five calculation books, Hughes records data that ultimately increase the chances of bluebird success and provide important population trends. And it is his hope that more people within more counties will do the same. In 2009, Hughes reported 844 fledged bluebirds for the community of Paris alone and a total of 1,971 bluebirds in the entire county—making Edgar County number one in the state for the sixth year in a row for number of reported fledglings. Humankind may have been unwitting partners in both their initial rise in numbers and their subsequent collapse, but now, as an educated partner, we can be witness to their return.

"The increase in the bluebird population is a remarkable success story. It is the direct result of widespread action by sympathetic bird lovers who pledged their help and followed through."

—Arnette Heidcamp, Bluebirds in My House, 1997

Our last stop of the day was at the Paris Dairy Queen—and we stopped not only for a meal. Behind the restaurant, beneath the shade of a tree, sits

(Photo by Chris Young)

Help Bring Back Our Gems of Blue

Think about next year's bluebirds now, while winter weather keeps you indoors. To order a copy of the above referenced brochure describing bluebird nesting habits, tips on nest care and instructions for a constructing bluebird house, visit the DNR Clearinghouse at dnr.state.il.us/teachkids/ordertype5.asp

A male bluebird awaits an opportunity to check on his three nearby nestlings in a box located behind the Paris Dairy Queen.

an outdoor eating area. Beyond that is one of Hughes's bluebird boxes, mounted on a pole in a grassy oasis. The nest box has been a feature at the Dairy Queen for six years, and it attracted bluebirds almost immediately. "I'll have a hotdog and a side order of bluebird viewing," I could imagine customers saying.

"Let's see if everything looks good," Hughes suggested. And, sure enough, all was well with three fast-asleep, five-day-old nestlings. Soon he would spot the bluebird father in the nearby tree, patiently awaiting the chance to check on his young. Hughes explained that the males take over much of the feeding, allowing the females to rest or perhaps start a new nest, since bluebirds can have as many as three nests in one season.

When Gayla Foote, who owns the Dairy Queen along with her husband Mike, joined us at the bluebird box asking, "How are our little babies?" it became obvious that these birds were an expected and appreciated part of the neighborhood. This thought was confirmed when Mayor Craig Smith pulled into the parking lot at his office next door, and we walked over to find out how his bluebird nest box was doing.

Given their charm and the assistance provided through their substantial consumption of insects such as cutworms, crickets, beetles and grasshoppers, who could ask for a better neighbor? Thanks to Loren Hughes and his trails, the bluebirds of Paris have found not only a friend but also an entire community.

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From mid March to mid August, Loren Hughes monitors 300 nest boxes on his numerous bluebird trails.