

Rhapsody in Blue

"... loss of natural cavities caused by human encroachment into forests led to severe declines in bluebird populations. Non-native species like House Sparrows and European Starlings compete with bluebirds for natural cavities. However, bluebird conservation programs are enormously successful..."

*"How the waiting countryside
thrills with joy when Bluebird
brings us the first
word of returning spring."*

— W.L. Dawson, 1903

Home Sweet Home. Wooden nest boxes are easy to build and set out, and offer bluebirds a cozy room, a roof and a door. In other words, bluebirds need to nest in a hole or cavity.

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My husband and I love birds, and on that premise, Kris and I drove to Lewistown in February 2001 for a bluebird conservation program. The presenter, Bob Niebuhr, inspired us to join the non-profit Mountain Bluebird Trails organization on the spot. We took home five bluebird nest boxes and secured each to straight and sturdy fence posts on our property. We waited.

Our feathered tenants were terrific! The males' leisurely, buoyant flight offered a view of azure feathers, as if they carried the Big Sky on their backs. Hearing their warbling song on the breeze made us pause and smile. Best of all, they joined us on summer evenings: Kris and I sipped a glass of wine on the porch while Mr. and Mrs. Mountain Bluebird hopped in the grass, nabbing insects.

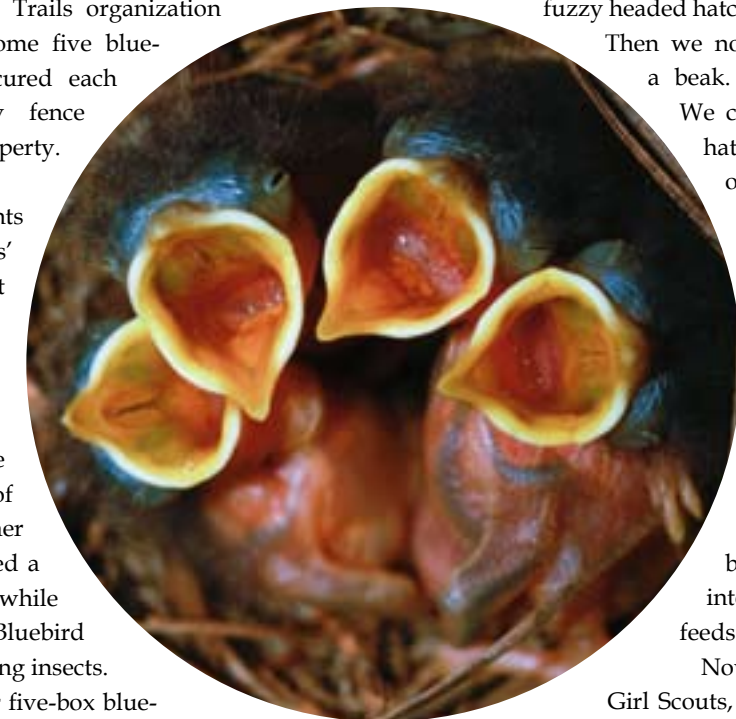
Two years later our five-box bluebird trail swelled into two separate trails with 42 boxes placed on fence posts along dirt roads winding through the Judith Mountains foothills. Scattered ponder-

osa pines intermixed with prairie grasses make fine Mountain Bluebird habitat. The birds breed in early May through June. Beginning in May, Kris and I spend a couple of hours every 10 days monitoring our trails, a 43-mile round trip. We peek inside a nest box and at first all we see are naked, fuzzy headed hatchlings with nubbins for wings.

Then we notice the slender yellow V of a beak. Then another, and another. We count four Mountain Bluebird hatchlings heaped atop each other. I jot down data. Later I send it to Mountain Bluebird Trails.

We've discovered a marvelous deed, tracking the status of nest building, egg laying and hatchlings. We feel an almost parental sense of care and satisfaction when we enable successful nesting. Bluebird conservation piques our interest in wild creatures and feeds our knowledge of biology.

Now we give presentations to the Girl Scouts, garden clubs and other organizations. We explain to our audience that bluebirds are cavity nesters, or birds that nest in natural cavities. The Mountain Bluebird is the most common bluebird species





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ABOVE: Establishing and monitoring bluebird trails is a grass roots conservation effort by individuals, civic and service groups. Girl Scout Zhora Alberston-Gore gives Cathy Moser a hand cleaning a nest box. BOTTOM LEFT: Homebody. The female lays eggs a day or two after she completes nest building. She and her mate will care for their chicks until they fledge, at about 21 days of age. BOTTOM RIGHT: Spring arrival. Bluebirds are one of the early bird species to wing their way back to Montana from southern wintering grounds. For many Montanans, seeing that first flash of blue signals winter is finally giving way to spring. Male bluebirds are vivid blue, while females display bluish-gray coloring.

in Montana, and the other two, the Eastern and Western, also inhabit the state.

Male bluebirds migrate in late February, usually arriving in Montana ahead of the females. After a male establishes his territory, he woos a female by singing for her, waving his wings and enticing her to select a nest site. He guards the nest while she builds it. She incubates eggs for about 14 days, then broods the young for another 21. Her doting mate delivers crickets, moths and spiders to feed her and the nestlings. Both parents would die protecting their young. After the chicks leave the box, or fledge, they stay close to their parents. October completes the bluebird season, and in large flocks they fly south for warmer climes.

The loss of natural cavities caused by human encroachment into forests led to severe declines in bluebird populations. Non-native species like House Sparrows and European Starlings compete with bluebirds for natural cavities. However, bluebird conservation programs are enormously successful and one of the largest grassroots conservation efforts in North America.

People who admire bluebirds increase the birds' populations by erecting and maintaining nest boxes in favorable habitat. The idea of "alternative housing" for bluebirds came from Dr. T.E. Musselman of Quincy, Illinois. In 1935, bluebirds occupied 86 percent of the 102 nest boxes he placed along country roads. Attracting bluebirds is easy, and

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What's for supper? A male bluebird will feed ever-hungry hatchlings caterpillars, mealworms and other soft-bodied insects. When the youngsters are five days of age, he'll add hard-bodied insects to the menu.

the ability to develop and monitor a trail is not restricted by age, educational or social backgrounds. It's a fun, enriching activity for individuals and families.

The Montana-based Mountain Bluebird Trails boasts around 600 members who care deeply about bluebirds. Trail monitors have recorded fledging over 300,000 bluebirds since 1974. We're an outdoorsy group enjoying field trips, attending an annual convention and exchanging knowledge about bluebirds. Take a look at the Web site, www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com, for a list of speakers and coordinators, a children's activity book, nest box building and placement instructions, and interesting bluebird news.

Kris and I could take credit for the hundreds of blue-

birds produced by our two trails. The truth is, we are little more than caring, privileged observers who provide a home. As much time as we spend outdoors reveling in nature, helping Mountain Bluebirds thrive is one small but rewarding way we give back. **AM**



~Freelancer Cathy Moser writes about history, lifestyles and the outdoors from her home in central Montana's Judith Mountains.