**Give Bluebirds the Space They Need**

Written by Bob Niebuhr

To reduce the number of tree swallows using nest boxes on a trail, try placing the boxes farther apart rather than pairing them. Accommodate the need of bluebirds for breeding territory of adequate size. It worked for me.

When Art Aylesworth convinced me to start my first bluebird trail in 1991 and sent me 25 NABS style nest boxes, I knew very little about bluebirds and even less about Tree Swallows.

I began by getting permission from a cattle rancher in the Highwood Mountains to put boxes on his property. No Bluebirds used the boxes in 1991, but tree Swallows loved the, using 20. I was not discouraged because a rancher up the road told me he had seen bluebirds, and that I could put up nest boxes on his property. I built 44 more boxes. In 1992, Mountain Bluebirds used 12. Tree Swallows used 40. Please don’t get the impression I have something against Tree Swallows, but I built this trail to produce bluebirds, and the number of swallows was overwhelming.

The 1993 season was more encouraging because Mountain Bluebirds used 26 boxes, fledging 155 young. I thought this trend of increased usage would continue, but it didn’t level out instead. Tree Swallows were using over half these nest boxes. People back east kept suggesting I pair these boxes and the same idea kept popping up in most of the articles I read in Salia and Bluebird.

But the idea that bluebirds like all birds are territorial, kept coming back to me as I thought of solutions.

Everything we read mentions territoriality and follows by saying don’t put nest boxes closer than 100 yards. That is a distance, not a territory.

In the Bluebird Book, authors Don and Lillian Stokes expand on this idea by saying “Bluebird territories vary in size depending on availability of food and nest holds and on the amount of pressure from other bluebirds trying to nest in the area. With sufficient food and a good nest hold, bluebird territory can be as small as two acres. However, a bluebird pair will not limit themselves to this small area unless there is pressure from neighboring pairs of bluebirds. Lacking this pressure, a pair may wander as much as a quarter mild from their nest site.”

My trails are in wide-open country and I have seen bluebirds travel a quarter mile to feed or perch in a tree!

With that in mind, I took down 12 nest boxes where I thought they might be too close together and put them up along 5 miles of different country road in 1999, spacing them at quarter mile intervals. Bluebirds used 10 of the 12.

In 2000, I added three more houses along the new road at the same interval, and bluebirds used 13 of the 15 boxes and 54 of the 78 boxes on the other trails. They fledged 304 young: 14 percent high than in 1999.

My swallow use is down dramatically, and I think it is worth driving the extra seven miles of trail to see all those beautiful Mountain Bluebirds. Today my nest boxes on this trail average 2.8 boxes per mile. I think this is closer to the territory size that bluebirds are looking for in this area.

**I solved my problem of overuse by Tree Swallows and under use by bluebirds by not putting two nest boxes close together, but by giving the bluebirds the space they need in this particular habitat.**

*Bob wrote his article in 2000. Bob’s trails were in the Little Belt Mountains, by Great Falls. I* ***emphasized*** *the last sentence, because all habitat is different. Erv Davis’s 400 box trail was (and still is) in the area around Ronan- Northwest. Erv ‘s experience was the same as Bob’s, and that is my experience also. My trails are in the northwest too, but I have more Western’s than Mountains. Tom Anderson’s trails are in central Montana. He paired some of his boxes with some success. Lew Melby in Eastern MT is pairing some of his boxes and will monitor them for success. As Erv used to say: “You are going to have to experiment and see what works on your trail in that particular habitat.” You may be surprised! Be sure to drop me a line or email other blue birders would love to know!*