

Marketplace

Andover man successfully makes new type of bluebird home out of PVC pipe

by T.W. Budig
Staff writer

Steve Gilbertson took his love of nature to the workbench, and what he fashioned benefits a conspicuous member of the natural world, the bluebird.

"I've always been interested in nature, and I decided to get into bluebird recovery in about 1988," said Gilbertson, a nationally recognized designer of bluebird nesting

boxes.

Actually, nesting "boxes" does not accurately describe what Gilbertson designed in his spare time in his garage in Andover.

Gilbertson abandoned more traditional nesting box designs and instead fashioned nesting tubes out of PVC pipe.

He glues the floor of the nest tube in place 4 1/2 inches beneath the nest entrance and attaches the top

of the nest by pins to the cedar roof, which is attached to the support pole.

The pole, made of conduit, is then slipped over the end of a rebar stake which is driven into the ground.

Gilbertson did not choose the materials to construct the birdhouses simply because they are inexpensive, though they are. In designing the housing, he had some overall objectives in mind.

For instance, since raccoons are a constant threat to nesting bluebirds, Gilbertson wanted to design homes that are invulnerable to raccoons.

To this end, he selected conduit as pole material because conduit is slippery and raccoons can have a tough time climbing it.

To make it even more slippery, Gilbertson rubs the pole with steel wool, then polishes them with a special type of car wax.

"I can't say some young, athletic raccoon can't climb that (the conduit pole), but most raccoons can't," he said. He does not find the muddy paw prints on his bluebird nests which so often mark the destruction of others, Gilbertson said.

"It's the most raccoon resistant mount that I'm aware of, anyway," he said.

Another dilemma Gilbertson attempted to solve in designing his bluebird home was the vexing problem of marauding sparrows.

Sparrows often raid bluebird nests, killing the young and taking the nest for their own. In attacking the problem, Gilbertson experimented with floor depth and pipe size.

He found that bluebirds did not care for smaller pipe, though tree swallows found it agreeable, he said.

The best method of discouraging the sparrows, he said, was to place the floor of the nest 4 1/2 inches below the entrance. Sparrows seem to prefer deeper cavities, he

said, and find his relatively shallow depth in bluebird homes not to their liking. Bluebirds, however, don't seem to mind, he said.

Besides offering protection from raccoons and sparrows, Gilbertson said, his pipe homes also seem to discourage blowflies, though he does not really know why.

Blowflies are a concern because they lay their eggs in a bird's nests. These eggs will hatch about the same time as the bird's eggs, and then blowfly larva will feed on the chicks, sometimes killing them.

"I'll have to do some research on this," said Gilbertson.

That Gilbertson has hit on a good idea for a bluebird home has occurred to more people than the inventor himself.

So far, he said, he has probably sold about 3,000 homes and receives letters of inquiry from as far away as Africa. Somewhere in Bermuda, bluebirds are using his homes.

"They're all over the country," he said. Locally, the Iowa Bluebird Recovery Program uses them, and just recently they've been recommended in Wisconsin, Gilbertson said.

Initially, in designing his bluebird homes, Gilbertson doubted the birds would like them because they tend to sway in the breeze. Later, given the evidence that the bluebirds do like them, he concluded the swaying probably did not matter.

After all, bushes and trees sway in the wind. Why not the birdhouses? Maybe it is comforting to the birds.

One thing is for sure: it is easy to check on the welfare of the bluebirds in the birdhouses, Gilbertson said. The tube "squeezes off" the roof fastening and this makes inspecting the birds simple.

Usually, the bluebird parents will not even flee the nest during inspections, he said. In his opinion



Steve Gilbertson is a nationally recognized designer of bluebird nesting boxes.
Photo by T.W. Budig

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checking the homes even daily does not unduly stress the occupants, he said.

The Minnesota Bluebird Recovery Program recommends checking the birds once a week, he said. But if the temperature does not rise above 40 degrees, he just leaves the birds alone, he said.

Since some of his original bluebird homes are in good shape and still in service, Gilbertson said, he can truly say his homes last for years.

Of course, a certain amount of maintenance may be necessary. They need to be emptied from time to time, and if cracks ever appear in the cedar roofs, the cracks should be fixed. Young bluebirds do not fare well in a wet nest, he said.

The simplicity of his design and its neat appearance lends itself to how he wishes to see the birdhouses used, Gilbertson said.

"I see them for use in someone's back yard. I didn't want them clanky or ugly looking," he said. "I like to see bluebirds. So I like to see them (the birdhouses) in use."

It is not too late to put up a bluebird house for use this year, Gilbertson said. He thinks with the cold weather, the birds are nesting later than usually.

But even several months from now, a bluebird house could be placed and perhaps used. He has seen bluebirds nest as late as July, Gilbertson said.

Ideally, bluebird homes should be placed in an open area. One school of thought dictates the homes should be placed at least 100 yards apart, as the birds are territorial.

Some studies have suggested that as many as 50-80 percent of bluebirds return to the area in which they were hatched to make their own nest.

Gilbertson thinks 80 percent is too high, but he says he believes many bluebirds do return year after year because he can tell he is dealing with the same birds from their personalities.

Gilbertson sells his bluebird homes for \$6. They are carried at some local nurseries and other businesses, where they sell for slightly more, he said.

Other than bluebirds, Gilbertson is working on designing homes for other cavity-nesting birds, such as woodducks. He has designed many other wildlife-related gadgets and even a better mousetrap, which on paper, and probably in use, looks ominous.
