

## BLUEBIRD PROJECT AT LANGHAM

by JAKE KARGUT\*

Three miles directly north of Langham where the road joins a little-travelled winding trail eastwards, a view of the North Saskatchewan River has few equals for beauty. Level pastureland gives way to rolling river banks. Here on the approach of spring, Mountain Bluebirds turn the snow-free areas blue with their numbers. For this is now the Langham project, the heart of which extends east one mile over a rocky winding prairie trail, then north for one mile of graded road and another two neglected miles. The area is, for the most part, native pasture: stones in piles and along fences and abandoned building sites are mute reminders of unrewarded effort by early settlers.

Bluebirds were once seen here each spring, but fewer in number with each passing year, until there came a time when there were none. Could the bluebirds be induced to return? The efforts of men like Dr. Lane, Lorne Scott and Dr. Houston were known. A quotation attributed to Luther seemed to fit the prospect: "A good work should seldom be undertaken or accomplished through wisdom or foresight — everything must be accomplished in the midst of error or ignorance."

A heap of salvaged tongue-and-groove siding and rough one-inch sheathing would be a start. The twine-box on a derelict binder suggested the size of a bluebird entrance. An afternoon of trial and error resulted in a nesting-box considered adequate and which with minor changes is still used. The goal would be one hundred houses in the winter of 1970-71.

The important factor in mounting them was the choice of sound fence-posts, long enough to leave the upper strand of wire clear in case of fence



Mountain Bluebird at one of Jake Kargut houses.

Robert J. Lor

repairs. The number per mile depended on available posts, with an average of 10 per mile. The territorial theory wasn't taken too seriously and, in any case, it would be put to the test (since most other trails limit boxes to three or four per mile — Ed.). In total ignorance, nesting boxes were placed in scrub, against poplar bluffs, and along fence lines with no road access. Some could not be located when hidden by new growth of foliage. The errors were dearly paid for.

The bluebirds arrived in 1971 and soon settled down to the task of housekeeping. There were 13 nesting pairs with a total of 69 eggs and young.

In 1972, another 100 units were added, including 3 miles of trail in the sandhills south of Langham, an extension east and north and a third west along Highway 5 to Borden. Forty-five pairs produced 262 eggs and young.

In 1973, another 135 units filled the gaps between Langham and the sandhills, where my trail joined an extension of the Saskatoon Juniors' trail and completed a total of 69 miles along Highway 5, from Saskatoon to Denholm. There were 55 pairs of bluebirds with 253 eggs and young.

Ten miles of quiet trails amid pasture-land, away from main high

\*Langham, Saskatchewan.

ways, accounted for all but one pair of bluebirds. Yet vandalism is the factor that threatens the whole project. Of the first 12 nesting units, half were destroyed without ever being used. Of 27 units in the sandhills, only 15 remained at the end of the second year. Altogether, 35 units have disappeared without trace. Along 10 miles of highway, the tops were systematically removed from every unit. Endless repairing has been necessary. Bare earth where there was grass; a box with eggs abandoned; a box twisted out of line and the piteous remains of six young swallows in the adjacent box; a dead bluebird beside her three doomed young. Human harrassment is no small factor but competition from House Sparrows is also important.

In September, I returned to the bluebird trail, abandoned by its occupants. There was a feeling of melancholy, longing and loneliness. Once again the recurring question

## INDIAN HEAD BLUEBIRD TRAIL IN 1973

by LORNE SCOTT\*

Over 2,000 miles were driven along the bluebird trail between mid-May and mid-July of 1973, and 685 Mountain Bluebirds, 15 Eastern Bluebirds and 1,800 Tree Swallows were banded.

Perhaps the highlight of the year was raising three pair of Eastern Bluebirds nesting. Two pair raised five young each and three were fledged from the third nest. This is the largest number of Eastern Bluebirds I have had nesting in one year. Two pair nested in 1966 and again in 1969. With the exception of 1971 Eastern Bluebirds were not observed during the other years.

Disaster struck the Mountain bluebirds in early June. A two-day Indian Head Saskatchewan.

“Where have all the bluebirds gone?” Then a turn in the road — and ahead was a sight that only a birder can appreciate: bluebirds, my bluebirds, adults and young on posts and wire as far as the eye could see! How will those darting, hovering, chittering bits of life survive the long way ahead? May all the days and nights be kind to them until their return.

Throughout the ages, man's deepest aspirations and longings, as expressed in religion, art, literature and music have centered around what my modest bluebird venture has left me with this day. With love and effort expended in the preservation and perpetuation of life and beauty, there may have been found a faint glimmer of immortality.

He who from zone to zone  
Guides through the boundless sky  
Their distant flight  
In the long way that I must tread alone  
Will lead my steps aright.

rain with winds up to 70 mph, resulted in up to 80% of the nests in some areas being deserted. Many nests containing eggs and newly hatched young were abandoned. Over half of the bluebirds re-nested after the storm, but some lost their nest boxes to the more aggressive Tree Swallow.

One Mountain Bluebird nest contained nine eggs when checked in June. A later visit to the nest revealed eight half grown young and the one egg which failed to hatch. This is the first time that I have ever found nine eggs in a Mountain Bluebird nest, and only the second time in 11 years that eight young have been raised in one clutch.

House Sparrows continue to be very destructive along the trails. At least 18 adult Mountain Bluebirds and 57 adult Tree Swallows were killed by sparrows in the houses during 1973. Some boxes contained up to four dead adult Tree Swallows, while on three occasions both male and female