

A NESTLINE DRAMA

by JOHN LANE*

On June 12, 1972, I was banding bluebirds east of Camp Hughes, Manitoba, on the Canadian Pacific Railway. When I arrived at Nestbox No. 783, known to house a brood of Mountain Bluebirds, a storm of frenzied food-calls met me as I removed the top to band the fledglings; it was obvious that these young were close to starving, which raised the question as to the whereabouts of the parents. Experience had taught me that frantically hungry baby bluebirds could mean both adult providers had perished, in which case it would be up to me to find alternative board and room for the foundlings; or in an extremity take them home and hand raise them. Having banded all seven, I found only five bands remained on the string, so I continued east till I finished up.

In an elapsed time of just over one half hour I was back to No. 783. I was climbing out of the car to investigate this nestbox once more, when a pair of Eastern Bluebirds flew into view, the female carrying a large beakfull of building material and the male in close attendance. The mother bird went directly to the nesthole, peered in, then went in and remained there for a full minute. Her entrance evoked another storm of frantic cries from the seven young, but she paid them no heed, and it was at once clear that this was no shy little Eastern female, furtively carrying nesting material to a chosen site, "in secret and apart"; rather this was a harried creature intent on preparing a new nest for her imminent clutch of eggs at the earliest possible moment. Without doubt this pair had been evicted from their previous home just as the eggs were due to be laid.

In any case, extreme urgency was evident in their every action; the female would hurtle from the nestbox, drop down to the ditch, seize whatever was handy in the way of grass and hasten

back to the nest. The male too was seized with the need for haste, and I saw him carry material and dump it through the nesthole, where it cascaded down to the starving babies. The fact that I stood within 10 feet of the nestbox, in full view of the working birds for some minutes, did not divert the pair for a moment: time was of the extreme essence and they had none of it for mere man.

By now it was certain that the Mountain parents were out of the picture, and the seven young were without support so I removed them from their nest. They were a bedraggled lot, covered with building debris and some with bits of grass protruding from their mouths. In their frantic with hunger, they had tried to ingest whatever came to hand. I left three of these babies in Nestbox No. 83 nearby, where a pair of Mountains were raising three young; the other four went home with me, where we quickly fed and comforted them. The following day we left these with another Mountain couple on the Hooke Ranch line; they had four of their own. Both at this nest and at Nestbox No. 85, the original young were of a similar age to the orphans.

Relieved of the nuisance of trying to build a nest on top of seven squirming foreigners, the Eastern female quickly got the job done. On June 14, two days after their arrival, I visited this nest again late in the day and found it already held two eggs — confirming the need for haste in getting the nest built. One important question remains with me: how did this Eastern pair know that there were no Mountain parents to dispute their takeover of this nestbox? It may be that they had been present for some time, quietly watching and listening for any sign of the original owners, before they made their move to take over.

JACK LANE

In Reader's Digest

"The Man Who Brought The Bluebirds Back" is the title of an interesting six-page story about Jack Lane in the September, 1973, issue of *Reader's Digest*.

*1701 Lorne Avenue,
Brandon, Manitoba.