

# ONE HUNDRED PERCENT OCCUPANCY OF 63 NEST BOXES

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I would like to share with you my efforts to start a line of nest boxes for bluebirds. It all began when I visited friends living on an acreage west of Saskatoon and saw bluebirds nesting in boxes. I decided to try putting up some nest boxes on our old homestead, which is intersected by highway #41, 50 km northeast of Saskatoon.

C. S. Houston provided me with plans for a bluebird nest box, and by late April 1996 I had built and put up six birdhouses around the farm, intended for bluebirds. I did not expect much, since the houses were put up quite late. I was really thrilled to find all six boxes occupied, but not by bluebirds. I had six nesting pairs of Tree Swallows. We lost one nest when a family of mice moved into one of the houses. The other five pairs raised families successfully, and gave me the idea of starting a bluebird line along highway #41.

The following spring I built 29 additional birdhouses and put them up on fence posts along the highway in mid-April. The timing was earlier but short of the mid-March ideal. Again, every house was occupied by nesting pairs of Tree Swallows. I checked all the nests twice. Deer Mice took over one nest, and in another the eggs were abandoned by the parents. Otherwise, 1997 was a good year for the swallows.

In 1998 I built another 28 birdhouses. By mid April, I had 63 spread out along highway 41 between Saskatoon and the Smuts turnoff. Again, we had 100% occupancy. There were 60 pairs of Tree Swallows, a family of House Wrens, a pair of House Sparrows, and the first pair of Mountain Bluebirds! However, this was not a great year for the Tree Swallows. In six nests, the young died after a couple of days of heavy rain, one clutch was destroyed when the nesting box was vandalized, mice set up house in one nest, and one brood died because of a severe infestation of lice. Despite these losses, 51

families of Tree Swallows were raised, as well as one family each of House Wrens, House Sparrows and Mountain Bluebirds. I contacted Dr. Bob Clark, who works for the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), and has an on-going Tree Swallow project in their St. Denis study area. I shared with him my success with the Tree Swallows and suggested he might want to band some of them.

One of the CWS biologists, Dave Shutler, volunteered a day of his time on July 5 and we visited all my birdhouses. By this time nearly half the boxes were empty because the young had left the nest. Most of the remaining young were too old for banding; banding can get them so excited that they may leave the nest prematurely. Two nests had young of the right age and we banded nine young birds. We also captured and banded six adult females.

I did not check the nest boxes again until I cleaned them out, at which time I found double nests in at least six boxes, suggesting that a second nesting, by a different pair or even of a different species, had been attempted later in the summer. I could not get over the numbers of Tree Swallows that must be around to fill so many birdhouses. Perhaps some of them represented the overflow from Bob Clark's project at St. Denis, which is about 32 km distant as the swallow flies. It seems highly probable that some of that number would not have found nesting sites were it not for our line of birdhouses.

Stuart and Mary Houston tell me that it is most unusual to have 100% occupancy of a line of bird boxes. On the 240-box trail built by the Saskatoon Junior Natural History Society in the late 1960s, occupancy of boxes has ranged from 76.3% in 1982 to 98% in 1977 and 99.1% in 1972, with an overall average of 90.1% of boxes in use, 1970-1997.<sup>1</sup>

For 1999 I have constructed over 100 additional birdhouses. They will be used to saturate that stretch of highway. I intend to visit the whole line at ten-day intervals and make careful records. With the help of someone from CWS, it may be possible to band many of the nesting birds and young, and give me experience that might lead to an eventual subpermit of my own. This is a

rather ambitious plan, which will require a good deal of time and effort. I hope to give another progress report in a year or two.

1. HOUSTON, M.I., and C.S. HOUSTON. 1998. Tree Swallow productivity near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. North American Bird Bander 23:42-44.



You cannot perceive beauty but with a serene mind. Henry David Thoreau.

"The environment is no longer an environmental issue" says A.F. Appleton, Environmental Commissioner of New York City. "It is the central issue of our times - a societal issue, and economic issue, a political issue, a cultural issue."

"On September 25, 1981, I observed approximately 6000 Monarchs, 4000 Red Admirals, 4000 Question Marks, and 2000 Mourning cloaks moving south through a 10-foot wide path adjacent to the beach at Riis Park, Brooklyn. NY."