

# Encouraging Wildlife at the Honors Course

by DAVID STONE  
Superintendent, The Honors Course,  
Ooltewah, Tennessee

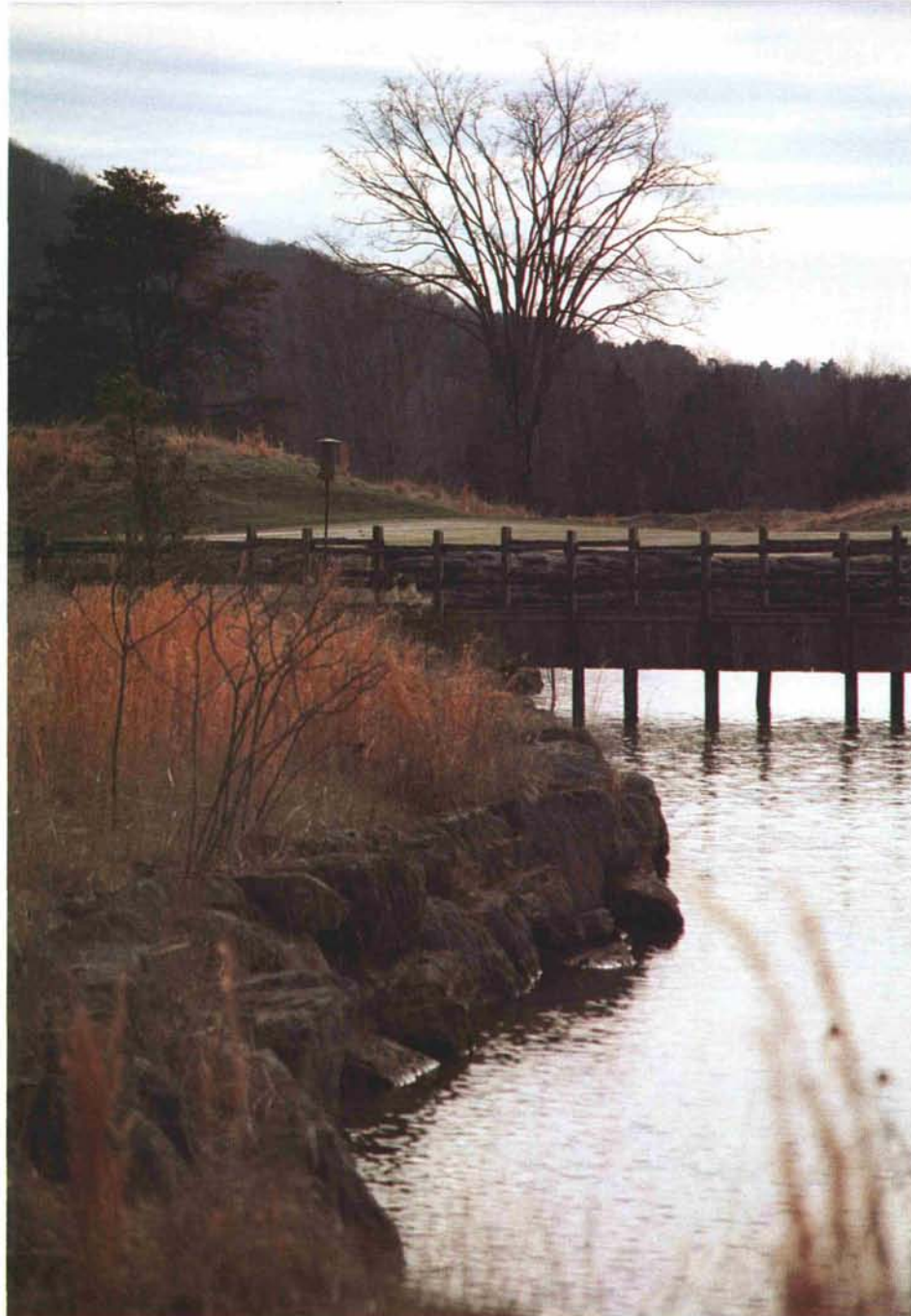
WHEN I accepted the job as superintendent of The Honors Course, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, which was still under construction, little did I know that I would become a real bird lover in a few years.

In the spring of 1983 (before the course was opened), Lew Boyd, one of our board members, purchased 10 bluebird houses. You can imagine that I was not very thrilled when he called me about having someone help put up the houses. I was more worried about everything we had to get done before the course opened. He assured me they would not be in the way after they were erected.

There were already a few bluebirds on the course (a fact I remember because I had not seen any in several years before coming to The Honors Course), and they quickly took up residence in the houses. That was nice, but that was the end of my involvement as far as I was concerned.

A couple of years later, Mrs. Jonnie Lyons, an avid bird lover and the wife of one of our members, asked me if we had cleaned out the birdhouses after each hatching. I told her that not only were they not cleaned out after each hatching, but that I didn't know they were ever supposed to be cleaned out. She set me straight on why it was important, both to help keep the nest free from lice and to prevent other predator birds from reaching in and pulling out the nestlings after an accumulation of old nesting material had raised the height of the nest.

For some reason I listened to Mrs. Lyons. I assigned Joey Keef, a worker on the crew who seemed interested in



*A diverse habitat is available for many wildlife species on the golf course. Erecting bird houses, not mowing some tall grass areas, and leaving a few dead trees standing in out-of-play areas all provide wildlife habitat.*

wildlife, to start checking out the birdhouses about once a month and clean out the old nest as any birds were fledged. Mrs. Lyons often came to the course with Mr. Lyons to watch the birds as he played golf. Because of the way the course was maintained, there was good habitat for a wider variety of birds than she normally saw on golf courses.

Anytime she saw me on the course, she would wave me over to tell me about some birds she had seen or to ask me if I had seen a particular kind of bird. I told her I knew a few birds but had

no idea what the birds she was talking about looked like. That was another mistake. In a few days, I found a copy of *The Guide to Field Identification of North American Birds* on my desk. A note was attached to it stating that the pages had better be well worn the next time she saw it. I'll admit the book was interesting, and I started learning to identify a lot more birds.

By this time we were more into our bluebird house program and did repair work on the houses in the winter. This consisted mostly of repairing the 1½-inch entrance holes that had been

enlarged by starlings and other birds. The bluebird population on the course seemed to be increasing each year.

A carpenter named Bob Pierce was working for a construction company making repairs on the clubhouse. Bob is a bluebird lover and made bluebird houses in his spare time and gave them away. He said we needed more houses for the acreage we had, and he brought us a total of 21 houses over a two-year period.

With all this help and pushing from other people, I was really into the bird business now, but what happened in the late spring of 1989 changed my interest and outlook on birds forever.

Joey came in one morning and asked if I knew of the house between holes 9 and 10 that had a bluebird family living in it. I told him I did. He said he normally saw the parents flying in and out several times a day, but that since he had not seen the parents this morning, he decided to look into the house. What he found was three dead babies and two live babies. He felt that the parents might have abandoned the nest and that the two remaining should be brought in. I told him he was probably mistaken and that we didn't know how to raise birds, but to watch them for the rest of the day and bring them in if he didn't see the parents all day. I had forgotten all about them when at quitting time Joey came in with the two infant birds.

We called a local veterinarian and he advised us to feed them raw hamburger meat. It took very little effort to get the hungry birds to eat. Putting a small glob on the end of a toothpick and whistling as a cue to open their mouths worked very well. We estimated the birds were 10 days old when we got them. We kept them in a shoe box on the secretary's desk in the shop. They wanted to be fed about every 20 minutes. It's funny how there was always someone around to feed them.

In a few days, my wife Mary called the local nature center and got more information. We stopped feeding them hamburger and started with a mix of canned Kennel Ration Original Formula dog food, applesauce, powdered baby cereal, bone meal, and liquid baby vitamins. This provided a better balanced diet for the birds. Since school had just gotten out for the summer (Mary is a school teacher), she took the birds to the house (we live on the golf course) and took care of them for the rest of the summer. She named them Bubba and Sister.

Like any parents, we were overly protective of Bubba and Sister. We kept them at least a week after they could fly, bringing them insects and putting them on the floor so they could learn to get their own food. Also, we did not release them until they would fly to us for food. This turned out to be wise, since adult birds normally take food to their fledglings for about three weeks after they have flown out of the nest while they learn to get their own food.

Sister was killed by a stray cat, but Bubba made it to adulthood. He flew down into our hands a few times a day all winter to get meal worms we bought for him. As warmer weather came and insects became plentiful, he came less and less frequently until he stopped coming altogether. He did bring a mate over one day to check out the birdhouse in our yard, but he was run off by another bluebird that had already claimed it. Still, we felt good that Bubba had adapted to the wild.

In 1990 we had even more up close and personal bird contact. First a very young crow fell out of his nest on another golf course in Chattanooga. They knew of our experiences the previous year and asked if we could raise it. We found out that they take much longer to grow to maturity than smaller birds, but we made it with him. Unfortunately, the fifth night he was out on his own, an owl killed him in a tree in the yard.

One of the crew members found a blackbird that had gotten out of the nest too soon. Since we could not find its parents, we had to raise him ourselves. He was the most interesting bird we have ever raised, staying with us for over three months before earning his wings and leaving.

A tree blew down on the course that spring, killing two of the three robin nestlings in it and breaking the leg of the third one. We got his leg taped by a veterinarian. His leg made a total recovery and we raised him successfully. He stayed around for about two weeks after we let him go.

Also in 1990, three bluejays fell out of their nest at different times but only a few days apart. We raised them, too, and they stayed around most of the summer before getting wild and leaving.

In 1991 we found an abandoned bluebird nest with only one bird still alive. We were able to find another nest with birds the same size, and we put him with them. He was adopted and raised by the parents. Later that summer we found another abandoned nest with three of the five dead. One of the two

remaining birds died about two hours later, but Blinkey made it. I estimate he was only five days old when we got him. Though younger than Bubba when we started with him, Blinkey was never quite as tame as Bubba. He still comes over to the house this winter, but the closest he will come to me to get a worm is about three feet. He comes with 10 or 12 other bluebirds. The others wait for us to throw them worms out in the yard. Only one of the other bluebirds will get close to us at all. We believe this is Bubba, who would be nearly three years old now.

Since we have been so close to these birds, we have increased our efforts to help other birds on the course. We already have a good diverse habitat for many species. We have put out winter food in the form of suet, have made snake guards for many of the houses, and have plans to make houses for some larger birds, such as woodpeckers. In 1991 we successfully fledged 142 bluebirds plus a few other birds in the bluebird houses. During the nesting season, we now try to check the houses twice a week. The trend is for more orphaned birds during summer periods with a lot of rain.

To attract a large number of bird species to the course, there should be as much habitat variety on the property as possible. The ideal would include some solid thick woods, some thinly wooded areas, some tall grass, water, and, of course, short grass areas.

We never mow all of our tall grass areas at the same time, but we do try to get all of it mowed over a two-year period. That way the birds always have some tall grass to hide in. We never mow any tall roughs during the nesting season. Weed control in these areas (other than mowing) is done by manually chopping the most obvious weeds at times when we can't start other jobs that day.

Try to leave dead trees standing if they are not in places where they are likely to fall on someone. This will help attract woodpeckers.

If you can't grow any tall grass, you can still increase the bird population by providing nest boxes. You can probably find someone to donate the boxes, and you also may find some retired people who are willing to check the boxes for you weekly during the nesting season. As you can see, you can become very involved, or perhaps you can help the birds without spending too much of your time. I think you will be surprised at how many birds you will see and how much the members will notice them, too.



*(Left) When David Stone accepted the job as golf course superintendent at The Honors Course, in Ooltewah, Tennessee, little did he know what an avid bird lover he would become.*

*(Below) Bubba became the first of many adopted birds after he was abandoned by his parents. He was raised on a mixture of Kennel Ration dog food, apple sauce, powdered baby cereal, bone meal, and liquid baby vitamins until he was old enough to forage for insects himself.*



### Some Tips for Bluebird Houses

- Bluebird houses can be purchased. Some carpenters may make them for you (perhaps free), or your crew can make them on rainy days. Books can be obtained that describe the proper dimensions, but perhaps the most important item is the hole, which has to be exactly 1½ inches in diameter.

- Houses should be mounted 4 to 6 feet above the ground. A post is better than a tree trunk because of the threat of flying squirrels.

- Place boxes no closer than 100 yards from each other.

- Avoid areas with heavy timber and heavy ground cover. Snakes and flying squirrels will kill the birds.

- Avoid areas near buildings, if possible, because of the proximity of starlings, sparrows, and cats.

- Mount the boxes in short grass areas, from which bluebirds obtain insects.

- Whenever possible, face the boxes toward a small tree or shrub.

- In the southern states (south of Ohio), whenever possible, place boxes so that a tree can cast afternoon shade on the boxes. This is most important for the second and third sets of nestlings, since the summer sun can heat up the boxes so much in the afternoons that the young birds jump out several days before they are able to fly. Sometimes the adults stop sitting on the eggs and abandon the nest if the boxes are too hot.

- Monitor the boxes two times per week while nestlings are in the boxes. If some young birds are dead in the box, watch to see if the parents are still feeding the ones still alive. If not, try to find other boxes with birds the same size and put the orphaned birds into the boxes with those birds. If none can be found, contact a nature center near you or try to raise them yourself.

- Clean the boxes as soon as each set of nestlings leaves the nest (you could have three families in a season — possibly 15 fledglings).

- If the hole is enlarged by other birds or squirrels, cover it with a metal washer that has an opening measuring exactly 1½ inches.

- Winter food for bluebirds includes the berries of these plants: honeysuckle, hackberry, red cedar, dogwood, sumac, American holly, bayberry (deciduous).

- If you decide to take on orphaned birds, the best food is called Jay Mix, which is a mix of Kennel Ration Original Formula canned dog food, apple sauce, powdered baby cereal, a slight bit of bone meal, and liquid baby vitamins. The consistency should be such that small globs can be fed to the birds on the end of a toothpick or similar object. They need to be fed about every 20 minutes during the daylight hours. Do not try to give water to the birds. They obtain enough moisture from the food and can be harmed by water going down their windpipe. When they can fly and you have turned them loose, you will still need to feed them several times a day for about three weeks until they learn to catch their own food.