

ON COURSE WITH NATURE FLYING HIGH

A model nest box program at Hop Meadow Country Club, Connecticut.

by JAMES BUDNY

SINCE BEGINNING our nest box project in 1992, we have successfully fledged more than 650 young birds at Hop Meadow Country Club in Connecticut. This significant contribution to bird conservation began with just a modest effort and a strong commitment to make our program a success.

Through our nest box program, we sought to accomplish three goals:

1. Attract insect-eating species of birds to our property.
2. Attract these species for golfers' enjoyment.
3. Help the Connecticut Bluebird Restoration Project rebuild the bluebird population.

Getting Started

In 1992, Bruce Porter, longtime maintenance worker and naturalist at Hop Meadow Country Club, saw an opportunity to increase bird populations. He speculated that the addition of nesting boxes for cavity-nesting birds would attract bluebirds and tree swallows to the golf course. After consulting David Rosgen, a local wildlife biologist and ornithologist who developed the Connecticut Bluebird Restoration Project, our Nest Box Program was fledged.

With the hope of attracting birds that eat insects, we started by erecting 14 nest boxes in ideal locations throughout the course. Along with bluebirds, tree swallows are also insect eaters and are welcome to inhabit our nest boxes. Prior to establishing our nest boxes, we had not seen either of these species on our property.

The size and placement of boxes, as well as proper predator protection and monitoring of the nest boxes, are critical to help restore the eastern bluebird population that had been depleted over many years. Typical placement of nest boxes is in open field areas out of the way of normal golfing and maintenance traffic, where the boxes would be least disturbed. Hop Meadow Country Club has areas between and around golf holes that we allow to grow wild for the season and are mowed down in the fall. The autumn mowing keeps these fields from turning into thicket and eventually forest.

It cost us approximately \$300 for 14 nest boxes, which were made with 1" boards, drywall screws, mounting poles, and hardware. We donated excess materials to our consultant in exchange for his time. Good-quality nest boxes can be purchased for \$15 to \$25 each. Local scouts may be willing to donate boxes as part of a scout project.

Doing It Right

Nest box construction, monitoring, predator protection, and yearly maintenance are critical to our successful program. Boxes must be constructed to specific dimensions: 4" x 4" interior dimension with a 1.5" opening hole. The box must have ventilation, which allows air through the upper portion of the box. In addition, drain holes must be present in the floor in the event driving rain floods the box.

We believe weekly monitoring during the breeding season is critical to our success. Our monitoring process includes visual checks for predator markings such as clawing by raccoons or cats, looking through back vents for wasps or hornets, and checking for markings left on greased poles by snakes trying to get at the eggs inside. Wasps and hornets must be removed because they deter birds from making nests in the box. Once the nests are established, weekly opening of boxes to identify species and keep close count of eggs and young for recording purposes gives us accurate year-end counts of birds fledged and possible problems.

Getting Results

In 1992, our first nest box year, we set out nest boxes prior to spring migration of birds from the south. Of the 14 boxes erected, birds occupied 13. Since that time, we have added 12 additional boxes to total 26 presently on our property. In 1998, we recorded 99 young bluebirds and 60 tree swallows fledged. (Results from 1999 were not available as of press time.)

We have converted nearly six acres of intensive maintenance areas into naturalized areas to create new locations where nest boxes are attracting more birds. In addition, these areas provide food and cover for a diversity of wildlife.

We feel that our nest box program has produced excellent results for our golfers as well as the entire region. Since 1992, Hop Meadow Country Club has fledged a total of 379 bluebirds and 277 tree swallows. When these birds migrate throughout the region, others can enjoy their beauty as well.

Adding to the Golf Game

When our nest box program began, many golfers were skeptical in thinking that by putting up boxes on poles we could attract beautiful birds. The old-timers who said they had not seen a bluebird in decades were astounded to see them return. Golfers and employees are noticing our nest box program, as well as inquiring about other species on our property and enjoying their beauty.

Make the Most of Your Nest Box Program: Perspective and Recommendations

To make this program successful, we believe a weekly monitoring system during the nesting season is a necessity. Over the years, we have developed recording sheets to efficiently report weekly data that allow us to track successes and problems. With facility manager Mike Wallace's commitment to support the success of this program, we now dedicate approximately two hours per week to monitor our nest boxes.

There are aspects of the program that require specific knowledge to be successful. Fortunately, we had access to a local expert who visited our golf course whenever help was needed. Most areas have bird clubs with knowledgeable people who would be glad to provide assistance. The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program also can provide useful fact sheets, monitoring record sheets, and telephone staff consultation.

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