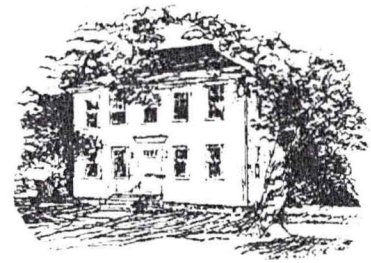


IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Bluebird Boxes of Indian Hill

The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) was commonly seen in Indian Hill in the 1930's. Village farms with pastures, orchards, and open fields, separated by wooden fences were ideal sites for the songbird. But the bluebird population plummeted by mid-century for several reasons.

Local farmers replaced wood fences with barbed wire or metal, eliminating popular nesting sites. Estates were sold; subdivisions proliferated, and the bluebird's natural habitat disappeared. Increased use of pesticides harmed the birds, and introduction of the European Starling and the House Sparrow to the US increased competition for nesting cavities.



The North American Bluebird Society (organized in 1978) established a national network, promoted specially designed birdhouses, and educated the public with strategies to save the songbird from extinction. Svante Humbla and Miggie Jacobs, with other Village birdwatchers implemented the program here in the 1980's. Bird nesting boxes were placed throughout the village and have been monitored weekly during spring and summer for more than 20 years. The handmade boxes are mounted on 5 foot poles located in areas with sparse vegetation. Adaptations were made over time, such as sizing the opening to deter starlings, and Svante Humbla's innovative shutters that provided additional roosts and warmth. Bluebird boxes are visible in parks, Camargo Club golf course, Cincinnati Country Day School, Turner Farm, Peterloon, Green Acres, Rowe Arboretum, and

other locations.

The Eastern Bluebird is 6-8 inches long and weighs about 1 ounce. Its attractive plumage has thrilled onlookers for generations. Some migrate south in winter, and others live in the area year round. Their preferred habitats have one important characteristic: low thin groundcover, and scattered trees for roosting. Their diet consists mostly of insects and a variety of berries during winter months.

Males establish their territory mid-February, and courtship and nest selection begins in March. Once a couple, the BBs honeymoon near their nest box; the male encourages the female as she builds the nest. In April, eggs are laid, one a day on successive days, for about 5 days. Incubation is 14 days, and after they hatch both adults work from dawn to dusk feeding the nestlings. When they are 18 -20 days old the fledglings leave the nest. Second and sometimes third broods occur in June/July and August/September, depending on weather, the BB's age, and predators. Predators include raccoons, snakes, cats, Starlings, and Sparrows. Starlings and sparrows kill by repeatedly pecking at Bluebird heads. They do not eat what they kill, seeking only to claim the nest box as their own breeding cavity.

Indian Hill bluebird volunteer monitors clean their assigned nest boxes in winter and begin weekly observations in early spring. It takes Miggie Jacobs 2½-3 hours per week, covering a different trail each trip. She visits each box, knocks on it (permitting mother to fly out), then opens the door and inspects, noting the number of eggs/babies, and condition of the nest. She records this in her notebook, and tabulates results for the Bluebird Society. At times, she has to dispose of public enemy number one: the House Sparrow. Once she opened a nest and found a snake lethargically digesting his prey. Since then she coats the posts with engine oil to discourage reptiles. Miggie carries extra boxes in her car to replace damaged nests. Her monitoring kit has a device that baffles the entry holes from raccoon paws. Other tools of the trade are insecticide, screwdrivers, nails, and plastic bags. Though she has never worn gloves before, Miggie will do so this year and also wear a mask due to the threat of avian flu.

The bluebird occupies a special place in American lore as the symbol of happiness, and its name has been mentioned more frequently than that of any other native bird in American musical lyrics. Thanks to the monitors and the nest boxes, Indian Hill residents can view this gentle gem while humming, "Mr. Bluebird's on my shoulder – it's truth, it's actual – everything is satisfactual... Zip a de do dah, zip a de day".

Thanks to Miggie Jacobs for assistance with this article.