Guidance Regarding Setting Up Bluebird and Other Cavity Nesting Bird Trails

Many who are unfamiliar with bluebird conservation do not understand that setting up a nest box trail is only one step in helping bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting birds. The following guidelines, if followed, could result in the best opportunity for the Eastern Bluebird and other native cavity nesting birds to survive and thrive.

The first step in any project should be the gathering of information from reputable sources. Contact a local, state, regional or national organization that is knowledgeable about conservation efforts for native birds. The North American Bluebird Society, New York State Bluebird Society as well as Audubon Societies would be happy to assign an experienced mentor to advise on a project. Additionally, NYSBS website (www.nysbs.org) has a number of handouts listed under *Plans and Handouts* as a resource for bluebirders seeking information. The NYSBS Board members also possess years of bluebird conservation experience and are happy to assist. Board members can be reached by using their e-mail address located under *Plans & Handouts* - Officers/Directors/Committees.

In learning about how to help bluebirds and native cavity-nesting birds, here are some critical factors that should be considered:

1. Is the trail situated in proper bluebird habitat? – e.g., an open area with low grass interspersed with trees. Are the boxes a safe distance from low brushy areas (House Wren habitat) or from a location where House Sparrows will be a problem? These non-native birds often evict and frequently kill bluebird adults on the nest and will kill young and destroy eggs of cavity-nesting birds including bluebirds. (See the fact sheets prepared by NABS on Getting Started with Bluebirds and on House Sparrow Control located under *Plans & Handouts*.)
2. Is the nest box design appropriate for bluebirds (e.g., proper construction materials, proper hole size, floor area, adequate height of the hole from the floor, proper drainage, sufficient roof overhang etc.)? Does the nest box have adequate protections for control of excess heat and will it keep out water during heavy rain? Does the nest box open to allow for ease of routine monitoring? (see the NABS Nest box Specifications Fact Sheet located und *Plans & Handouts*)
3. Is the box mounted properly (e.g., on a metal, stand-alone pole), and does it have proper predator deterrence – raccoons and rat snakes develop the habit

of routinely raiding bluebird nest boxes, especially when they've been successful at finding a meal of eggs or baby birds. NABS recommends that necessary precautions be taken in areas where such or similar predators exist. (See the NABS Fact Sheet on Predator Control located under *Plans & Handouts*).

4. Is the nest box trail being monitored? It is not enough just to put up nest boxes. The boxes must be monitored at a minimum of once a week during nesting season to address problems as they occur (e.g., blowflies, predators, and other disturbances). In your area, bluebirds may often complete three nest cycles in a season. The monitor should clean out the old nests once the chicks have fledged so that the adults can start a new breeding cycle, which involves the building of a new nest. (See the NABS Fact Sheet on Monitoring Bluebird Nest boxes located under *Plans & Handouts*)
5. Finally, and most importantly, is there a plan in place to continue the monitoring of the trail of nest boxes after the builder of the trail moves on? Nest box trails can stand for many years. If they are not being monitored each nesting season, they should be taken down. Untended trails fall into disrepair and become unsafe for nesting birds. Additionally, unmonitored nest boxes allow for non-native species such as House Sparrows to overbreed an area, making it unsafe for bluebirds and other native, cavity-nesting birds.

All of these elements should be addressed when Scouts, or other youth groups set up a bluebird trail. The well-being of native cavity-nesting birds should be the priority.