

Recovery of a **Bluebird Recovery Program**

On 10/15/2015, Earl Garrison asked me to be “coordinator” of the existing bluebird boxes in the village. I had responded to the 9/3/2015 Globe article asking for interested monitors before he moved from the village. Earl left me a memory stick which included a 56 page printout he had compiled of the 1130 bluebird box locations. He had compiled this data from Manny Ackerman. Manny began placing boxes in circa 1985. His upcoming move limited time to get the full story. Earl gave me information of several bluebird organizations and other related groups, but my impression was that what I inherited was a bluebird recovery program. I began to immerse myself researching *Sialia Mexicana*-the Western Bluebird.

Earl had not had the time to verify the printouts since he began helping around 2005. In order to assess the situation better, I decided to survey 100 boxes along a mile stretch of Avenida Sevilla between gates 1 & 3 [within United]. Along with my partner, we headed out on foot in early October. It was apparent that the printout was of very little use in locating the boxes. It was quicker and more efficient to walk and search every tree. The data we had collected identified the box type; the physical condition; and, whether there was evidence of bluebird activity and/or evidence of other species. We have not surveyed the areas within Third Mutual. There remain 400–500 boxes within the Mutuals and GRF property that are not accounted for.

In the 1st week, we found over 50 boxes that needed to be taken down and returned to the woodshop for refurbishing. Earl then gave me further instructions to inspect, and dispose of any dilapidated ones out in the field. By 9/22/2015, we had mapped & recorded over 100 boxes. The process of removing boxes on foot and transporting them to a dumpster required hauling 20 pounds of equipment by

backpack and a pull cart. This required a great deal of labor and time. The guideline Earl gave for box placement was to put them about 100 yards apart.

Our survey findings included wasps/nest, fungi & mold, spiders, snails, carrotwood seeds, and a variety of insects; 70% had House Wren⁶ nest material [this renders the boxes unusable to the bluebirds]. Less than 15% showed evidence of old bluebird nests. We also found damage from imbedded mounting wires in tree limbs. [Rather than leave the remaining wire which could endanger the tree trimmers, we decided to remove the wire. Utilizing ladders and bolt cutters, we would clip on both sides of the limb, then, by clamping onto one end of the embedded wire and twist it out. We sometimes encountered sloped terrain that required hanging onto a limb while standing on the ladder to maintain balance. Thankfully, this will now be done by the tree trimming crews]. Shepherd's hooks have been in use since the mid 2000's.

In October, shortly after I was asked to be the coordinator, I sent out a lengthy group email to the 10 contacts Earl provided who were monitoring more than 2 boxes. This accounted for less than 150 boxes, or ~15% of the 1130 boxes listed. I continued to update my activities and discoveries on an irregular basis over the next year and a half. I have over 100 archived emails, many containing multiple back and forth responses. I also met individually with a handful of the respondents to assess their trails and update them regarding placement based upon the current bluebirds' territory needs. I introduced them to, and provide at no cost our new lifter and left cedar boxes to replace their old painted boxes. Several adapted to some of the new ideas I introduced but still had trepidations. Others wanted to continue the status quo. Several suggested I contact the Laguna Hills Audubon Club (LHAC).

Two other residents had responded to the Glove article and volunteered to help in the wood shop. Phil Kowal took over building new boxes. He discussed the issue of repairing the old boxes with Earl. Phil explained that valuable time was being spent when it would be far more efficient to simply construct

new cedar boxes. He informed Earl he would stick to constructing the cedar boxes only. The new boxes were advantageous due to their light weight, inexpensive cost to build (\$5) and durable, readily available, natural cedar fencing. Dave was assigned primarily to refurbish old boxes. I deemed the process of retrieving and redistributing old painted boxes mostly made from scrap lumber. The refurbishing of boxes was terminated as there were no volunteers to do it. Dave invented a lightweight, inexpensive lifter now in use to raise and lower the boxes using a modified paint roller and adding a broom handle. The roller was bent in such a way to form a simple pendulous hook which interlinked with a corresponding bend in the shepherd's hook which is mounted to the top of the boxes. This allows the box to remain upright during raising and lowering to allow us to examine the contents without spilling the eggs or chicks. It also added an extra foot of lift as a side benefit.

In November 2015, I began attending the Southern California Bluebird Club [SCBC]⁷ meetings. I met the 3 founding members of the club who were the subject of a Huell Howser segment of "California's Green"⁸ which aired on 09/29/2007. Founder Susan Bulger advised that the territorial distance between boxes be kept a minimum of 400 yards apart. This provides roughly 3 acres of grassy land necessary to sustain a nesting family of bluebirds.

With the collected data and the information about the inadequate feeding areas including the proliferation of unused boxes, we came to the conclusion to reduce the number of boxes and replace with the newly designed cedar boxes. I met with Phil and Dave in early November and presented my plan. I suggested that what we had was a bluebird recovery program that needed to be recovered. As a natural scientist by degree, I determined the best solution would be to provide a conservation biological solution to the situation. Dave had introduced a satellite mapping app that allowed pinpoint locations of the boxes within each territory. On average it was calculated that each territory would require 2 cul du

sacs' worth of grass in order to encompass the 3 acres of lawn [taking into account pavement, man-made structures, landscaped slopes and flower beds].

By mid-December 2015, we moved forward and removed approximately 300-400 boxes and reduced the number to 51 cedar boxes within the United and GRF areas. During the process of removal, we began receiving feedback from residents and were warmly met by a majority of the community, and were able to remove boxes without incident. The question of disturbing and removing personal property items was brought to my attention several times when I was out in the common grounds attending the strategic redistribution of the nesting boxes. The majority of the people I encountered who had personal boxes up acknowledged the need to remove and thin out [the boxes]. Many of these residents wanted to negotiate to have a box hung in close proximity to their manors. The next most stated objection was to keep the old-style heavy boxes that were painted blue.

Part of the difficulty making this decision was that there was a 'disconnect' in communications. While out in the field when a box is found, there were no other way or means to identify it other than a few boxes which had Earls' business card stapled to the box bottom. Without knocking on every door, there was no way to match a box out in the common grounds to a manor. For example, how could anyone identify the box placed in front of the Towers. In an attempt to alert the village of my activities, I contacted the Globe's editor in a detailed email asking to place a follow-up story, but was told it was too soon to run another article on bluebirds.

In January 2016, I attended the Directors meeting of LHAC and inquired as to their concept of the bluebird boxes and was told they were not involved in the bluebird activities. They asked if I would like to join the club and perform that duty. Then I gave a quick presentation of the new trail standards I was trying to establish. This brought up discussion as to concerns they had which included the discarding of old boxes versus recycling. One person questioned whether the birds would be able to find the boxes if

they were moved. There was concern whether the bluebirds would adapt to the natural cedar boxes. Many expressed disagreement with needing to place the boxes with a lifter, because they would have difficulty using it due to physical limitations. The idea that there was not enough grass to sustain the bluebirds near the manors didn't seem to be an issue. Even Earl expressed that having too many boxes could have a negative impact. Many felt that since they have had success reestablishing bluebirds in the area. They wondered, "why not leave it the way it is". One director stated she didn't care about the science. She did not want a box removed from her observation post.

A month later, I met with 2 LHAC club board members. They asked that I refrain from further removal of boxes until it could be determined whether the birds would adapt to the unpainted boxes. My agreement however was not based upon their request to cease and desist, but for the reason that I needed to get my newly mapped trails completed before nesting season.

Beginning in the spring of 2016, I researched the Leisure World News, [from 1965 until the last year scanned in mid-1990], at the History Center with the help of Bob Ring. There was no mention of bluebirds. In addition, I went to the Recreation Department and perused the Laguna Hills Audubon Club files from its inception to the present. Again, there was no mention of bluebirds.

I concluded that Manny Ackerman began putting up bluebird boxes starting in the mid 1980's for donations to the Audubon club. He would place the boxes in a tree near the residents' manors. It seems that because he was the Audubon Club president - this had become an accepted practice. The LHAC had never requested an exemption to the common grounds rules nor has any other club or individual. As a footnote, the LHAC has since disbanded.

The efforts to reintroduce the western bluebird to Laguna Woods have been an overwhelming success. However, the lack of any organized strategy has resulted in an overwhelming mess. I do have compassion for the perceived losses this group has experienced. There reactions were expected. It was a

difficult decision and it came down to what most would benefit the bluebirds. However good intentioned the bluebird monitors have been, there are too many unaddressed problems.

These are a few of the glaring omissions I have encountered and identified which I have attempted to address over the past 2 ½ years:

- Lack of training: the current best practices of blue birding are not being followed, or are not understood by current monitors. The *basic* rule in blue birding is, “location, location, location”, maintaining a 400 yard spacing. There was a fair amount of unsubstantiated practices used, for instance, one village resident submitted a suggestion to the Southern California Bluebird Club (SCBC) newsletter “Bluebirds Fly” to save dryer lint for nesting; it was quickly debunked during one of the SCBC’s monthly meetings. In practice, lint will retain moisture and can lead to molds and fungi. Old wives tales and folklore has led people to believe that chicks will be abandoned by their parents if their nest has human scent; birds don’t smell very well, if at all. Also, to please alert any individual purporting to have possession of bluebird feathers; the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 was implemented in response to the slaughter of exotic birds for their feathers, *including all songbirds*, exported to foreign countries for hats or jewelry. People try to anthropomorphize the bluebirds to support their interpretations of bluebird behaviors. For instance, I’ve heard from several people they believe that the same family returns year after year without evidence of a leg band or other means of identification.
- Time wasted: The process of locating, removing, transporting from the trees, repairing in wood shop, transporting to gate 14, painting, transporting to wood shop, storing in wood shop until hung on tree at a later date was discontinued. It took hours toting a backpack with ladder & bolt cutters on foot to remove 10-20 boxes a day. Hauling the boxes around in order to have them painted blue was an unnecessary waste of our precious time.

- Lack of monitors: The most often offered solution was for more monitors. “This would solve everything,” according to multiple sources. While there are few new volunteers that have stepped forward to help monitor, where will they come from?
- Reverse-NIMBY [Not in my backyard]: Even when there was a willingness to accept the new information and standards, the strongest backlash was that residents still wanted a box by their individual manor; period. Some villagers have mealworm feeding boxes that are intended to supplement the birds’ food source to attract them. While attempting to supplement the bluebirds’ food supply during nesting season, in the long run we may do well to not interfere. The need to equilibrate between the size of the feeding area as well as the ability of the soil to regenerate a food supply to meet the bluebirds’ needs especially in a semi-arid coastal community which continues to be in a severe drought. This will determine whether there will be an adequate food supply throughout the coming years. As a footnote: there are over 150 planned conversions of small grassy areas within the 2 Mutuals to drought-tolerant ground cover, further reducing available their feeding area. The golf courses are also doing the same. We will be better off going to where the bluebirds are rather than the reverse; to accept the role of stewards as opposed to being a birdwatching group. By bringing those boxes near to our homes, there may be unexpected consequences. Bluebirds are notorious for severely injuring or killing themselves defending their territory when they crash into reflective windows thinking it is a rival male. More often, they fall victim to cats - a notorious bird predator. I would implore those people to treat the bluebirds as what they are: a wild creature. *These are not comfort birds*. I have a quote from an original SCBC founder Dick Purvis gave during a Huell Howser segment of “*California’s Green*”⁸. Dick introduced the first bluebird box in Orange County in the early 80’s and also invented the original ‘basket-lifter’ utilizing a telescoping pool pole. He

stated the reason he mounts the boxes 20 feet off the ground was this: “*the worst predators are people.*” He and the other two founders are still active in the club.

- *Collateral damage:* When focusing on our intervention to increase the bluebird population, we must also give consideration to other grass foraging birds, such as geese, ducks, crows and robins. Are we unfairly affecting the competition for a very limited food supply by stacking the deck against other migratory birds?

The results after 2016 and 2017 nesting data confirmed that indeed my new approach worked significantly better. Last years’ data included reports from several Third mutual residents which totaled 94 fledglings in approximately 100 boxes. The Western Bluebird [WEBL] club accounted for 213 fledges in 48 boxes all within the United and GRF trees.

When I assumed stewardship of the bluebird boxes in the village, I was led to believe it was part of a bluebird recovery program. I discovered that it was a loosely organized, well-intentioned group although not part of any authorized village club. I found a number of people who were willing to direct my actions but not willing to adhere to anything they deemed irrelevant. I was often asked to compromise.

As a degreed natural scientist with 35 years of experience, I was taught, “*the 1st rule of medicine is to do no harm.*” I submit that the current condition of the bluebird box is doing harm in ways not taken into consideration. The boxes have not only become an eyesore which needed to be addressed, but to overlook the consequences created by the completely unnecessary number of boxes violates the very premise for why the boxes were placed. Bluebirds are not endangered; they are not threatened; they are not near-threatened. Bluebirds lose their homes every time a dead tree is removed in a suitable habitat. The only dead trees we have left are in remote areas. The very basis for bluebirds is to provide suitable housing within a sustainable ecosystem. Simple enough to put up a box and the bluebirds will

come. What we know now about conservation biology is that in Audubon's 50 year forecast for the WEBL is that there will be an increasing loss of their range [CA, WA, OR, AZ, UT]. The projected status places the WEBL on the near-threatened list by 2060^{4,5}.

These are a few of the concerns I have that are currently not being addressed within the United and GRF common grounds [I have not evaluated the entire areas within 3rd:

1. Territory^{1,2,3, and 6} – There are over 20 specific considerations I follow when placing a box. I found that boxes located near most manors within the United area were producing 30% fewer fledges than those adjacent to LARGE, grassy, greenbelts or on the golf areas. More than once I have found a dead chick in the nest next to healthy appearing siblings. This can occur when starving chicks compete for a limited food supply where the strongest survive [pecking order]. When scrambling for food, they can cause injuries leading to infestation; when decomposition begins, the infection becomes so prevalent that it spreads to the healthy chicks; eventually all may perish. This foul, fetid process can be smelled from quite a distance.
2. Safety – tree limb damage is only part of the equation. The offending wire that becomes embedded in a limb, it becomes no longer visible, and can then present a danger to tree trimmers using a chain saw. The hidden steel left behind when trimming the limb can cause a violent jamming of the chain creating havoc to the chain saw operator.
3. Coexist⁶ – by increasing WEBL numbers, we have reduced the availability of grassy feeding areas to other species that would also enjoy foraging a few insects from our lawns. Plans are to continue converting grass to indigenous or drought tolerant ground covers.
4. Exit strategy – currently, there is no plan. An exit strategy is now included on the Southern California Bluebird Club website as part of their mission statement. This had been the topic of conversation at prior club meetings. Laguna Woods Village is not the only urban area facing this

problem of abandoned boxes. This is a widespread issue throughout other Orange County municipalities.

We, the WEBL club of Laguna Woods Village have offered a new plan to remove unauthorized items scattered throughout the common grounds within all affected mutuals. If given the permission, we will replace and redistribute our light, less-expensive boxes and newly designed, light-weight lifter boxes abiding by Federal, State, and local regulations. Currently available painted bluebird boxes are sold in retail outlets and bluebird organizations for up to \$40 each. Our natural wood cedar box cost \$5 and is 44% lighter than previous boxes. Our new compact, light-weight lifter cost \$9 vs. the bulky, old lifter of \$40.

Our initial goal was to have authority to hang our bluebird boxes on trees within GRF common grounds. When I first appeared before the CAC [Community Activities Committee] in November 2016, I was informed that the formation of an approved club would be necessary to get permission to hang boxes. Without prior GRF approval, all bluebird boxes currently in place would be in violation of the GRF common ground rules. If enforced, all boxes could be declared out of compliance and that would end the issue. Rather than a decision that might result in the removal of the boxes, we firmly assert that we have taken the necessary steps to rectify that issue. We have chosen as stewards of a bluebird recovery program to now accept the existing “conditions” we inherited, but to move forward proactively with our clubs’ proposals. Without approval for the WEBL club, there would be no reason to continue with our efforts to request permission from United or Third.

I have decided to leave a decision regarding the bluebirds up to the Third & United Mutual Boards to come up with an action plan. Whatever input they need the WEBL club is available to provide the needed information. Should the Third and United Boards decide to invite our club to be the sole

managers of the bluebird boxes in their common grounds, we will be glad to help. We could begin as early as the April 2018 United Landscape committee meeting.

We offer a conservation biologic approach to the recovery of the western bluebird with a plan to provide a suitable habitat, to monitor the nesting data, and to care for and maintain the nesting boxes.

Recently, our village celebrated its 50th anniversary. Please grant our request that will enable us to provide the western bluebird, *Sialia Mexicana*, a suitable nesting environment for the near future.

Finally, we will happily work with anyone currently monitoring bluebirds who would wish to join our efforts as well. At no time have I publically responded to the personal criticism I have received, and I truly hold no animosity. This has been an effort of love and giving on our parts as well as theirs.

Recently, my partner and I were taking a walk when a male resident inside his manor began hollering through his window about bluebird boxes which included an F-bomb. Since my partner and I were already 15 yards past the manor heading away from it, after a brief verbal exchange and a one-finger salute, we continued our walk. We had left the area, crossed a street, went past 4 manors, and had ascended uphill when roughly a minute later we looked back and saw that he had left his manor and made it to his CDS entrance facing our direction. There was sufficient distance for me to not worry; but my partner was shaken up. Security is aware. When I was booed at the March CAC and also overheard a voice mutter to "sit down" when I was at the dais to speak, I did not know who uttered those snipes. I believe it to be the same individual as he too was present at the meeting along with his partner, a former Audubon club director.

A letter was editorialized in the Globe stating that my actions would cause "Manny Ackerman to roll over in his grave". My response is: better than *John James Audubon* rolling over in his grave if I **do not** do this.

Submitted by; Danny Henson