

A volunteer monitoring program encourages prevalence of bluebirds

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By Shannon M. Nass, Special to the Post-Gazette



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Julie Meier, a volunteer, checks a bluebird box for new occupants in the prairie ecosystem at the Jennings Environmental Education Center, Slippery Rock. Meier's collected data on occupied boxes, numbers of eggs and hatched chicks help the program keep track of the bluebird population.

SLIPPERY ROCK -- A brilliant flash of blue darted across the sky and wove through the stark brown trees of early spring. The beauty of this winged creature with its bright blue head, back and tail, and burnt orange throat, stopped me in my tracks and stole my breath.

As Julie Meier of Chippewa describes bluebirds: "Their color is like the blue sky, and their breasts are like the warmth of the sun. It's a perfect combination."

Meier is the bluebird monitor volunteer at Jennings Environmental Education Center in Slippery Rock. The opportunity is part of the Bureau of State Parks' Cavity-Nesting Trails Volunteer Program.

Jennings began participating in the program more than 13 years ago. Brandi Miller-Parrish, environmental education specialist at Jennings, said the abundance of open, grassy spaces at the park -- the only protected prairie ecosystem in Pennsylvania -- is preferred by bluebirds. It is what inspired Jennings to adopt the program.

"If you have the habitat for bluebirds, why not provide the boxes for them and monitor them?" said Miller-Parrish. "It's also a chance for somebody other than staff to be involved in collecting data, and it helps out with the species. If you've got all the pieces to the puzzle, why not put the puzzle together?"

When the opportunity arose to be a bluebird monitor at Jennings, Meier said she jumped on it.

"I thought, this is one way that I can help Jennings, which to me is a very special place," she said. "I get to volunteer here plus monitor bluebirds. It's a win-win."

It's also a responsibility that Meier said is near and dear to her heart. She has been independently monitoring 12 bluebird nest boxes for five years on the farm owned by her and her husband Leo.

"I love the outdoors, and I'm an avid birdwatcher," said Meier. "It's something my parents enjoyed and they handed that down to me."

The nest boxes were a housewarming gift from her father.

"My parents came for a visit and my dad had a whole pickup truck full of bluebird boxes that he had made for me," she said.

Despite her knowledge of the bluebird cycle, Meier underwent training by Miller-Parrish before taking on her newfound responsibilities. She received a manual and was given a tour of the 24 nest boxes at the park.

On a recent monitor walk, Meier demonstrated how to approach a nest box. She stood to one side and gently knocked to see if a bluebird would fly out. After ensuring the box was empty, she lifted the roof and peered in to see some twigs at the bottom, indicating the beginnings of a nest.

"Somebody's been here checking it out," Meier said. "They're coming."

Meier said most bluebirds are just beginning to build their nests this time of year in preparation for the three to four broods they will have from May to July. Nests are built with stems, twigs and feathers and are lined with fine grass.

When monitoring bluebirds, Meier said it is important to walk around the nest box rather than leaving a dead-end trail, because a worn path attracts predators.

The second nest box she visited had the trappings of a wren's nest. Like bluebirds, wrens are a cavity-nesting species and are welcomed at the park. Meier removes the nests of predatory species such as sparrows and starlings, which take over bluebird nests and break the eggs.

Meier said she is careful to spend only a few minutes at each nest box.

"The whole point of being a monitor is to be as quick as possible so you don't disturb the family," she said.

After visiting each nest box, Meier fills out a form indicating the box number, nest type and species. She also counts the number of eggs, hatchlings, unhatched eggs and fledglings.

At times her duties include maintenance on the nest boxes such as repairing leaks.

Meier will monitor the nest boxes once a week until September. The data she collects will then be sent to the Bureau of State Parks and compiled statewide.

When not monitoring bluebirds, Meier works as manager of the Venture Outdoors North field office. She is also a member of the Wampum Chapter of the North Country Trail Association and the Ohio River Trail Council in Beaver County.

Meier's enthusiasm for bluebird monitoring is infectious and best explained in her own words.

"They are fighting such tremendous odds," she said. "To see them start as this beautiful blue egg, and then progress to their first flight -- I'd like to meet the person who wouldn't be a little excited about that."

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