

Bluebirds of happiness descend on valley

By E.G. WHITE-SWIFT
Of the Emerald

BLUEBIRDS: If the bluebird is a symbol of happiness, then the residents of the Willamette Valley should be a little happier, as western bluebird populations are increasing.

Four years ago, local bird-watchers became concerned about continual declines in bluebird populations. Bluebirds were once as common as robins, but the reduction of many old cavity bearing trees and snags,

along with the introduction of the starling and the house sparrow, all but eliminated the bluebird from the valley.

By strange and fateful coincidence, both the house sparrow and the starling are not only confirmed cavity nesters, as is the bluebird, but both are very aggressive and highly prolific. Since the starling and house sparrow are introduced species, the bluebird has not developed any defense mechanisms to fend for itself.

To bring back the bluebird, birdwatchers in the Willamette Valley have created "bluebird trails." The trails are a series of specially designed nest boxes located in prime bluebird habitat. The bluebird boxes are built with entry holes too small for starling access, and close enough to the ground to make them unattractive to house sparrows.

The bluebird boxes are built with one hinged wall that allows periodic inspection by bluebird trail monitors. The monitors check the boxes on a regular schedule to determine bluebird nesting success.

The Eugene bluebird trail was started in 1974 by Al Prigge of the Eugene Natural History Society. Prigge builds the boxes, places them on fenceposts around the area (with the permission of landowners), and monitors the trail.

"We now have 228 nestboxes on the trail," says Prigge. "At last count, these boxes fledged 379 western bluebirds this year. This is more than double the 1975 total and almost eight times the 1974 totals."

Prigge, with the help of Eugene Natural History Society volunteers, is building more nests and banding bluebirds. "We banded 20 bluebird nestlings and several adults this year," says Prigge. "As more volunteers become involved, many more bluebirds from our boxes will be banded. Information from bird band recoveries could be very useful in piecing together a more complete picture of western bluebird habits."

Volunteers have played a major role in bluebird trails in Eugene,

and in trails started in Corvallis, Oakridge, Portland and the Mohawk Valley north of Springfield. Prigge is on the geothermal and energy staff of the Willamette National Forest which has been preparing the time consuming Breitenbush geothermal environmental impact statements, and has had to depend a lot on volunteers.



Not everything on the trail is rosy, however. Prigge has found snakes in the bluebird boxes, unexplained dead females sitting on cold eggs, and vandalized boxes. He has also found dead nestlings when cool and rainy weather inhibited insect activity and the adult bluebirds were unable to find enough food to satisfy the voracious appetites of the nestlings.

In addition to aiding bluebird nesting, some of the boxes have been utilized by other insect-eating birds. Chickadees, swallows, wrens and nuthatches have moved into the boxes. These species fledged over 400 birds this year along the bluebird trail.

So the next time you see the bluebird of happiness, thank Al Prigge and his friends.

PEDESTRIAN RELIEF: One of the most dangerous spots on campus is the EMU underpass.

A proposal circulating through campus transportation circles would straighten out the mess. It calls for a marked lane for pedestrians through one side of the underpass, and a separate bicycle channel with two-way traffic and a marked centerline through the other side.

The campus transportation committee has been working to update bicycle safety around the campus. The "yield barrels" at the campus crosswalk on Agate Street is one of its projects to keep bicycling students and faculty out of the hospital. Now, if everyone could be convinced to use lights at night.

GRAB-BAG: The planned Sierra Club ski tour this weekend has been canceled because of the absence of snow. In its place will be another mystery hike leaving the parking lot of the Amazon Community Center at 8 a.m. Saturday.

The Lane County Audubon Society's monthly meeting will be Thursday night at 7:33 p.m. in the Greenwaters Park Building in Oakridge. Forester Wayne Orr of the Oakridge Ranger District will discuss the planned sheep grazing on the Willamette

National Forest. The Audubon Society objected to Orr's original proposal this spring, which was "put out to pasture" until wildlife baseline studies by Oregon State University wildlife biologists were completed.

Dave DeSante of the Reed College biology department will present "unusual bird migrations" Friday night at the monthly meeting of the Eugene Natural History Society. It starts at 8 p.m. in Room 123 Science. DeSante's doctoral research was concerned with "reverse migrations" and much of his work, accompanied by slides, was conducted with vagrant eastern warblers on the Farallon Islands off San Francisco Bay.

The Southern Willamette Ornithological Club's December meeting is Monday beginning at 7:30 p.m. in the third floor conference room of Science III. The annual Christmas Bird Count, scheduled for Dec. 26, will be discussed.

A citizens lobby information day sponsored by the Oregon Environmental Council, Sierra Club, and League of Women Voters of Central Lane County, and University's Survival Center, is scheduled for 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday.

In the morning session, actors will demonstrate lobbying and testifying techniques using bills on excess packaging and field burning as examples. In the afternoon session, Lane County's legislators will be on hand to discuss environmental concerns.

For the latest on whales, the Survival Center is presenting the movie "Whales, Dolphins, and Men" tonight at 7:30 p.m. in the EMU, room to be posted. After the film, Wheeler Calhoun from Oregon State will talk about the economics of meadowfoam as an alternative to sperm whale products.

The next meeting of the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council is set for Tuesday. The open meeting will be in the Eugene City Council chamber and begins at 10 a.m. The agenda includes discussion of the nuclear fuel cycle hearings scheduled for early January; various status and progress reports on the Trojan Nuclear plant, and modification of existing rules on content of site certificate applications for thermal power plants.

A new organization, Forestry for Oregon's Tomorrow, has been formed, dedicated to the protection of Oregon's forest economy and environment. A coalition of Oregon business owners, forest workers and conservationists, Forestry for Oregon's Tomorrow hopes to work with both the Oregon State Legislature and in the Forest Service land use planning process to improve the outlook for Oregon's economy. For more information contact Randal O'Toole at 686-4356.



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