

From Fee Boxes to Bluebird Boxes

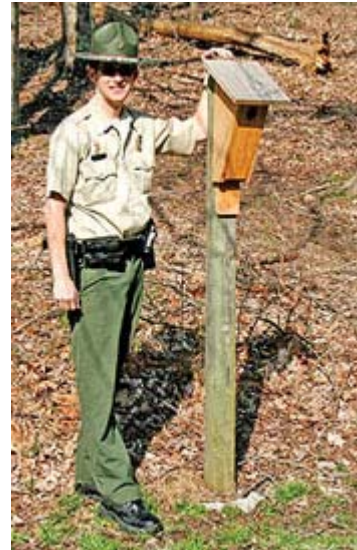
By John Bass

The next time that you take your family for an afternoon stroll through Montgomery Bell State Park in Burns, you might notice that the trees appear to be a little bluer and the air seems to be filled with the sweet songs from the Eastern Bluebird.

If you took that same drive not too long ago, instead of more bluebirds you would have seen access fee signs and fee stations scattered throughout Montgomery Bell. Now when you drive through the park, instead of access fee signs on 4x4 posts, you will see that they have been replaced with "Peterson" style Eastern Bluebird boxes.

In 2001, an access fee program was implemented to help relieve the budget woes in Tennessee State Parks. By the time it was over, 23 state parks (including Montgomery Bell) had an access fee system in place. Many aluminum fee tubes, as well as 4x4 posts, were erected within the park to collect the \$3 per day access fee.

With the election of Governor Phil Bredesen in 2003 we saw the end of the access fee program with his promise to abolish the program during his term.



Ranger John Bass and one of the "Peterson" style bluebird boxes at Montgomery Bell State Park.
Photo by Kate Hargrove.

While I was patrolling the park that following winter I noticed the 4x4 posts access fee signposts and thought that they would be excellent places to mount Eastern Bluebird nest boxes. After doing some research on the Internet about the different styles of nest boxes, I decided to build a few of the "Peterson" Bluebird Boxes. This style seemed to be a good choice because it would deter predators more efficiently with the angled front and the oversized roof. The oval hole would also make it more difficult for undesirable species such as House Sparrows and European Starlings to occupy them.

By the spring of 2007, I finished building 13 boxes and began attaching them to the old access fee sign posts scattered throughout the park. The months that followed proved to be some of the most extreme weather that Tennessee had experienced. The temperatures dropped to the high teens in late April and the record drought conditions followed in the summer.

Despite these conditions, the bluebirds adapted fairly well and managed to utilize 10 of the 13 boxes and had 34 successful fledglings for 2007.

During that first summer it became evident that the 100-yard spacing between boxes that many Web sites recommended held true, and subsequently the unoccupied boxes could be attributed to this.

That winter, I was able to build 17 more nest boxes to make the total an even 30. That following spring and summer, the weather was much more mild and better suited for nesting. In early April, after putting a nest box on all 16 of the old access fee sign posts, I found myself looking for suitable locations for the other 14 boxes. Keeping the 100-yard buffer zone in mind, soon all 30 boxes were mounted and ready for occupancy.

The summer of 2008 shaped up to be a great year for Eastern Bluebirds, at least at Montgomery Bell State Park. By the end of the summer, 26 out of 30 nest boxes were able to fledge at least one successful brood, with five of the boxes actually able to produce three broods.

On average, a pair of Eastern Blue-birds will build one to three nests per year with up to six eggs per nest. In all, 71 nests were built with only 14 percent lost to predation and 17 percent lost to abandonment, which proved to be more common as the summer progressed.

Out of the successful nests, the first brood accounted for 109 fledglings, the second brood had 63 fledglings, and the third had 26. That totaled 198 fledglings for the 2008 nesting season.

If you are interested in putting up a bluebird box or boxes of your own let me make a few suggestions. Check the boxes once a week from the time you put them out which is early April until the end of August. While checking them you want to look for the number of eggs or young in each box, check for insect infestation and clean out the old nests after the brood has fledged and flown away. I know you must be thinking "how can I check them without the mother smelling my scent on the box?"

Sorry to disappoint your mother but what she used to tell you about "not messing with baby birds because the mother will smell you and not come back," is an old wives tale. Most birds have a very poor sense of smell.

At the end of August, I took the nest boxes down and stored them out of the weather so they will last much longer.

Another thing to check for is predation. Most of the time the culprit is long gone, however they will often leave signs of their presence. For instance, Raccoons tend to reach in and try to pull the nest out through the entrance hole often leaving nesting material hanging out. Rat snakes, on the other hand, tend to enter the box and eat the eggs. In one case I was greeted by a Black Rat Snake when I opened the box. Needless to say we were both surprised.

While Raccoons and snakes are two common predators and natural enemies of Eastern Bluebirds, house cats are considered exotic predators. You should try and avoid placing boxes in an area that they frequent. Often times house cats will pluck the bluebirds off the nest and leave the remains at the bottom of the post or tree.

This winter I plan on building more "Peterson" style Bluebird Boxes to expand my ongoing research. This is where you can help. The Montgomery Bell Friends Group is providing wood for me to build additional boxes.

To help fund these efforts, the "Peterson" style boxes will also be made available to the public through the Montgomery Bell Friends Group for a modest donation plus shipping and handling. If you are interested in placing an order, you can contact the Friends of Montgomery Bell State Park at 615-797-9051.

The next time you drive through Montgomery Bell State Park, be sure and keep a sharp eye out for our fine-feathered friends and all the other wildlife that calls the park home.

Read more about the Peterson Bluebird House on the United States Geological Survey Web site www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/wildlife/ndblinds/petebblue.htm.

(John Bass is a park ranger at Montgomery Bell State Park in Burns.)