

# Crossroads Journal

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## Along the Bluebird trail in Brown Summit

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When we drove down the driveway at the home of Susan and David Millikan in Browns Summit, the llamas next door came to greet us, posing for photos and looking curious. It

was a sunny Friday afternoon, and my children and I were coming to walk the bluebird trail as part of a group project designed to support the nesting habits of the local Bluebird population. By monitoring the Bluebird nesting boxes to make See **BLUEBIRDS** page 8



Susan Milliken inspecting Blue bird boxes  
Photography by Robert Thomason

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## Bluebird Trail Project in Brown Summit

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sure they are clean and available for them to build nests and lay eggs, we are all helping to increase the population of bluebirds in our wildlife community.

Five specially designed Bluebird houses are placed in strategic locations throughout the Millikan's property, comprising the Bluebird trail, although a Bluebird trail can have as little as one or as many as 600 houses. Each is numbered, and a small notebook and pen are stored near house number one. Participants in the bluebird project walk the trail, visiting each house and writing down their observations in the notebook. Important data is recorded, such as the sighting of a nest, eggs or babies and any sign of Sparrow encroachment into the houses.

English Sparrows introduced into North American habitats have become aggressive enemies of Bluebirds. The Bluebird Trail project was designed to lower the population of Sparrows and increase the population of Bluebirds by ensuring more breeding success for Bluebirds. According to Barbara Haralson, who helped set up the Millikans' trail in 1998, the population of English Sparrows in the area had driven away the Bluebirds. In the first two years of monitoring, over 40 nests were removed, and by the third year the Bluebird population was back on track. She says that these statistics drive home the importance of monitoring. An unmonitored area can easily become home to too many English Sparrows, one of only two species of birds whose nests and eggs can be destroyed, under Federal Law, with Starlings being the other species. Federal law prohibits disturbing or possessing birds' nests and eggs.

English Sparrows' nests are messy and easy to distinguish from the neat bluebird nests. When Sparrows' nests are found in the bluebird houses, they are removed so that the bluebirds will have a chance to build their instead. We are the Bluebirds' advocates, ensuring a safe and available place for them to raise their young.

On the day of our visit, two of the five houses contained active nests. Babies had been seen and noted in the notebook, and the busy bluebird parents were

tending to them, wary of our approach. Before opening the box, I looked at the notes. The notes for Box Three begin in March, when the box was empty. On April 9th, the notes say, "We saw a nest in the cup, but the cup was tipped. We left it alone." Then, the same observation is noted on the 10th. Big news noted on April 14th: A Bluebird flew out of the box as we approached, and we saw four eggs in the nest." Then, on the 18th of April, five eggs are noted and watched until April 28th, when the first Bluebird babies of the season were seen and described: "We see at least three babies in the nest. Their eyes are closed and one has opened its mouth to yawn."

The mother and father made their presence known, chaffing from up on the power lines overhead, where they typically watch our visits. We packed up our equipment and carried it across the field, watched with relief by the protective parents and followed by the friendly donkeys that share the pasture with the bluebirds and other

The Bluebird Trail project was started by the National Bluebird Society in reaction to a stunning decline in national Bluebird populations. The NBS collects results from individual trails and collates the statistics, tracking the Bluebird population counts. Since the beginning of the Trail incentive in 1978, numbers have dramatically increased. This bluebird trail was set up for the Millikans in 1998 by a Girl Scout troop who purchased and sited the boxes, earning a Silver Award for the project. Each year the boxes may get moved to more favorable locations, and each year more folks get involved in this fun and educational project.

This year the project is being done by Brownie Girl Scout Troop 351, a group of home-schooled girls who are coming out to the farm with their parents and siblings to monitor the boxes. The girls have enjoyed the opportunity to provide this service to the wildlife community as well as the chance to learn science in such an interesting way. They are performing real science using the tools of the trade, mainly making observations and recording them, and comparing the data to the Bluebird timetables that are provided to add background knowledge to the experience.

According to Rives Howard, daughter of the Millikans, "I love the fact that that my kids are able to learn about bluebirds and enjoy the progress that they are making and see the miracle of life up close."

Once these babies fledge, the houses will be prepared for another brood and the cycle will continue. The Millikans have had success with their bluebird trail, averaging 20 fledglings per year. The data that they send to the National Bluebird Society is helpful to obtain trends on the breeding success of Bluebirds in the area.

After making the rounds of all the houses, we packed up, returned the notebook to its storage place, and waved goodbye to the llamas. The kids' enthusiasm bubbled over and we talked for miles about the birds and their future, about the llamas, the donkeys, the discovery of a dead field mouse, the butterflies, and it seems that we've learned about more than just bluebirds, we've connected ourselves to the life cycle.

**Mated male and female Bluebirds perch on telephone cable lines while keeping an eye out for the Bluebird box their young are nesting. A trio of baby Bluebirds wait for a meal.**  
Photography by Robert Thomason

**Start your own bluebird trail! A Bluebird Trail is a wonderful way for you and your family to support wildlife conservation efforts.**

- A bluebird trail can be started with as little as one bluebird house and as many as 60, so begin by looking around for possible sites. A good site for a bluebird house is at the edge of an open field or meadow with few trees or shrubs. Nesting season lasts until mid-August, so there is still time to make a difference.
- For help getting started, I recommend a visit to Wild Birds Unlimited, located at the corner of Plagah Church Road and Elm Street in Greensboro. You can talk to knowledgeable birders about the Bluebird Trails project and get help setting yours up and maintaining it. Wild Birds Unlimited is owned by Bill and Barbara Haralson, who have supported local bird enthusiasts since 1997. They can be reached at (336) 282-4458 or online at <http://www.stores.wbu.com/greensboro>
- Visit the North American Bluebird Society website to join the cause, find information and shop from an online catalogue: <http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/>