

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

The Shrike That Came to Dinner

On 13 February 1983, I was observing several species of birds at three feeders located outside my kitchen window. Around 0900, I noticed a disturbance on the ground underneath a thistle feeder. A Loggerhead Shrike was on the ground with a Dark-eyed Junco, which had been feeding below the feeder. The shrike hit the bird with its beak and then, with the junco still struggling, held the junco's head to the ground with its feet. After the junco ceased struggling, the shrike grabbed the bird with both feet and flew off, without apparent difficulty.

The shrike apparently came from a nearby field where I have seen one on numerous occasions during the winter. This is the first time I have witnessed a shrike capturing another bird, though I have seen them chasing birds, and shrikes are well known for including birds in their diet. I have seen them take insects several times. On one occasion in Arkansas, I watched one capture and consume a shrew (presumably *Blarina brevicauda* or *B. carolinensis*). The only other avian predator I have seen at feeders was a Sharp-shinned Hawk.—CHARLIE W. WOOTEN, P.O. Box 755, Elgin, S.C. 29045

Behold, the Not-so-gentle Bluebird

Bluebird enthusiasts often comment on the gentle demeanor of their favorite species and complain bitterly when these lovely birds are driven from nesting boxes and cavities by House Sparrows, European Starlings, and flying squirrels. During the 16 summers that I have had bluebird boxes in my yard near Zebulon, N.C., I have seen these structures used by Carolina Chickadees, Carolina Wrens, Great Crested Flycatchers, and flying squirrels as well as Eastern Bluebirds. Although bluebirds annually scouted a box erected in February 1975, chickadees used it every nesting season from 1975 through 1981, and I never saw any evidence of interspecific competition.

On 28 March 1982, bluebirds again scouted this particular box, which was a gift from Jack Finch, a founder of Homes for Bluebirds, Inc. Nonetheless, on 14 April the box contained a nearly completed but still unlined chickadee nest. I was away from home for several days. Upon my return, I was surprised to see bluebirds perched in the oak tree near the box, which I assumed to be occupied by chickadees. On 20 April I saw the female bluebird carrying nesting material into the box. I lifted the hinged front panel and saw a neat cup of pine needles resting atop the still unlined chickadee nest. Almost immediately after I closed

the box, the female added another pine needle to the nest. On 27 April the nest contained three bluebird eggs, and two additional eggs were laid to complete the clutch. On 18 May the nest contained five downy young, apparently about 5 days old. Although I did not witness the fledging, the abundance of bluebirds in the yard throughout the summer suggested a successful nesting. In late October bluebirds were seen perching atop the box and inspecting the interior. I hope this means they will roost in the box this winter and nest successfully again in 1983.

Naturally I wrote Mr. Finch to let him know that the box had at last been used by bluebirds and to inquire about his experiences with bluebirds' appropriating boxes already occupied by other species. Mr. Finch keeps detailed records of occupancy for the numerous boxes he has placed around golf courses in North Carolina and several other states. He reported that on 19 May 1982 he had found five baby bluebirds in Box No. 4 at the Zebulon Country Club, which is adjacent to my property. The young were in a House Sparrow nest that appeared to be on top of a bluebird nest.

On 17 July 1978, while monitoring boxes on the golf course at River Hills Plantation, Clover, S.C., Finch found three 11-day-old bluebirds in Box No. 5. This nest was 100% sparrow nest. Finch questioned men working nearby, and they reported that they had seen bluebirds and sparrows fighting.

On 10 May 1982 Finch had a nest of six Carolina Chickadees about 14 days old at his home near Bailey, N.C. One nestling was found dead in the box that day. The following day his son, who was working nearby, saw a male and a female Eastern Bluebird come out of this box. Upon checking the nest, he found two more dead chickadee nestlings. The next day one more was dead, but the remaining two apparently fledged. This was Mr. Finch's first experience with bluebirds actually killing other birds.

A.C. Bent, in his *Life Histories of North American Thrushes, Kinglets, and Their Allies* (U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 196, 1949), comments that Eastern Bluebirds have been known to compete successfully with House Sparrows and Tree Swallows that attempted to usurp their nesting boxes. He cites one instance of bluebirds' removing eggs from a swallow nest and dropping them on the ground. The bluebirds raised their second brood in the box formerly occupied by the swallows, and the latter species subsequently occupied the box vacated by the bluebirds.

"As the bluebird population increases and we make closer observations, I am sure we will see more bluebird take-over of other species' nests," Mr. Finch concluded. He correctly notes that building on top of an abandoned nest of another species should not be regarded as a take-over.

Anyone interested in ordering bluebird boxes or literature about bluebirds from Mr. Finch can write him at Route 1, Box 341, Bailey, N.C. 27807. Homes for Bluebirds, Inc., was organized in February 1973 to aid in restoring and perpetuating the bluebird population. Donations are tax deductible. "Come Back, Little Bluebird" is a brochure that offers many practical suggestions on building, erecting, and monitoring bluebird houses.—ELOISE F. POTTER, Route 3, Box 114 AA, Zebulon, N.C. 27597.