

including bluebirds, feeding on those berries one morning, Jack decided to start propagating it. Homes for Bluebirds paid a local nursery to root 1,000 cuttings from the tree, now named the “Finch mulberry,” and Jack gives away the rooted cuttings to people who are interested.

Jack also cleared some trees near his house and replanted the area with cuttings from the Finch mulberry. “Bluebirds will feed mulberries to their nestlings,” he notes, “after they have pecked and beaten and properly ‘killed’ them. They are a good emergency food when weather is bad in spring.”

Though he says emphatically that he is not in the bluebird business for fame or fortune, a measure of fame has rewarded Jack’s good work. In 1990, he appeared with Dan Rather on the *CBS Evening News* as part of a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Earth Day. Rather couldn’t have made a better choice. Few people have done as much to help bluebirds as Jack Finch.

Kevin McCurdy Fort Sill, Oklahoma

Fort Sill sprawls over some 95,000 acres in southwestern Oklahoma. This is the U.S. Army’s Field Artillery Center. On three artillery ranges with impact zones that look like moonscapes, recruits learn the skills needed to serve in army artillery units. Fort Sill is also where Kevin McCurdy monitors his bluebird trails.

Kevin is a biological technician with the Department of Army Civilians; he helps manage the extensive wildlife that lives on the reservation away from the impact zones. Many kinds of animals find welcome refuge here. “Because we allow hunting, a lot of our time is spent managing elk, deer, and turkey,” he says. “We make an annual deer census, we do prescribed burns to maintain habitat, and we serve as part-time game wardens.”

Kevin and his coworkers are also responsible for managing and protecting the endangered species that find refuge at Fort Sill. One of these is the black-capped vireo, a songbird endangered both by loss of habitat and the brown-headed cowbird, a notorious “nest parasite.” Female cowbirds lay their eggs in other birds’ nests, and the foster parents end up raising cowbirds at the expense of their own offspring.

The endangered vireos find excellent habitat in the rocky hills and canyons of Fort Sill, especially those bristling with patches of scrub-oak. It is Kevin’s job to reduce the cowbird threat by trapping as many cowbirds as he can. “By trapping cowbirds,” Kevin says, “we’ve found that we increase the vireo production — and the production of other species too.”

Kevin says the Fort Sill nestbox trails were started back in the 1980s when the leadership at the base decided to establish a nongame wildlife program.



A soldier and child at Fort Sill inspect a bluebird box on the West Artillery Range.

There was just enough money to construct a few nestboxes. Those first boxes — some 52 of them, all made of wood — were mounted 100 yards apart on a square grid rather than along the traditional straight line. “We wanted to see if the birds would use them,” Kevin says, “and they did — just as readily as boxes on a typical straight-line trail.”

Though nestbox monitors who are eager to attract only bluebirds pay careful attention to the habitat around a box, Kevin doesn’t worry too much about this detail. His boxes are intended for the use of all small cavity-nesters. “I don’t boot out any species except starlings and house sparrows,” he explains. “Wherever a hundred yards ends, that’s where a box is — within reason.”

On much of Fort Sill, the dominant vegetation is mesquite, Kevin says — perfect habitat for bluebirds. Six other bird species have also nested successfully on his trails. Besides eastern bluebirds, Kevin often attracts Carolina and Bewick’s wrens, tufted titmice, and Carolina chickadees. Sometimes a woodpecker or a gnawing squirrel will enlarge the entrance hole on a box, and in these boxes, he’s seen successful nestings by red-bellied woodpeckers and great crested flycatchers. Red-headed woodpeckers have started nests in a few boxes but have never brought off a clutch.

Of course, boxes with enlarged holes also attract starlings, but Kevin diligently chases them off. “I get tired of doing it,” he admits, but he doesn’t repair the big-holed boxes; he likes having some nestboxes available for larger cavity-nesters.

If Fort Sill is like a wildlife refuge, aren’t predators a problem? “We do have raccoons and skunks,” Kevin says, but not enough to cause concern. His nestboxes are mounted on long PVC sleeves, 2 or 3



Carol and Dennis Stayer place a PVC bluebird box mounted on a section of 4-inch-diameter PVC pipe over a T-post at Fort Sill.

inches in diameter, that slide down over metal T-posts to cover them completely. The small-diameter PVC sleeves may help discourage some predators, Kevin suspects, but they are used primarily for convenience. Habitat management plans call for regular controlled burns, and before a burn, it's easy to slide a box and sleeve up and off a post and remove it to a safe location. The metal T-post can stay in place.

"Weather can be more of a problem for the birds than predators," Kevin relates. It's not the heat that's so dangerous, he says. Summer temperatures do sometimes top 100 degrees for days at a time, but in such hot weather, Kevin says, "the birds just quit nesting." Instead, it's spring cold fronts that cause the most serious problems. One year cold weather cut the production of eggs and nestlings on Kevin's trails in half.

There's really nothing Kevin can do about cold weather, but he can do something about the cowbird eggs he sometimes finds in his nestboxes. "When I find one — well, it's gone," he exclaims. Kevin says he's more likely to find the reddish-speckled cowbird eggs in bluebird nests than in the nests of other species. "Sometimes I've seen two or three cowbird eggs in a nest," he says, "but a single egg is more common."

Most bluebird trail monitors never get to see a Bewick's wren, but Kevin does find these somewhat rare birds in his nestboxes fairly often. At one time,

this species was common across much of the southern part of the continent. But Bewick's wren has been almost extirpated east of the Mississippi, and it's becoming increasingly scarce in the West. Experts think the more aggressive house wren has played a major role in the decline of Bewick's wren. Fort Sill lies just south of the house wren's range, and here — as well in as the Southwest, where house wrens aren't common — Bewick's wrens are actually increasing in numbers. Over the years, Kevin has seen more than 100 of them fledge from his boxes.

"They start nesting in June," Kevin says. He's noticed that Bewick's wrens often choose boxes next to mesquite trees. "But there are also some boxes in open areas that they use all the time," he adds. Sometimes Bewick's wrens and bluebirds will alternate nesting in the same box, but Kevin has never seen evidence that one evicts the other.

Although the original bluebird boxes on the Fort Sill trail were made of wood, today Kevin uses mostly PVC boxes. And he's made an interesting discovery about box dimensions. His original PVC boxes were made from 6-inch-diameter PVC pipe for the simple reason that he got some for free. When his supply ran out, he went shopping for more and discovered that 4-inch-diameter pipe and caps (which he uses for the tops of his boxes) were priced much more reasonably than 6-inch pipe and caps. Kevin's trail now has many PVC boxes in both sizes, and he says, "The size makes no difference to any of the birds. They lay as many eggs and fledge as many young in 4-inch boxes as they do in 6-inch boxes."

Kevin currently monitors a total of 140 boxes on several different trails at Fort Sill. He says his favorite trail is probably the one he set up in 1993 for the kids at the base school where his wife, Shirley, teaches fifth grade. "We started with six boxes," he says, "but we've added more, and we've planted things — now it's more like a nature trail." You won't have to worry about heavy artillery on this trail if you ever decide to visit, but be careful just the same. The kids do the monitoring when school is in session, and they take the responsibility very seriously. "I have to warn people," Kevin says, "don't mess with the kid's boxes, because you'll really get harassed if you do."

Dr. Shirl Brunell — Trails of Hope in Arkansas

Experts agree: a trail of nestboxes can offer "learning experiences" for school-aged children. The most obvious lessons are about bird biology and behavior — and about developing an ethic of conservation. But according to Dr. Shirl Brunell, a clinical psychologist in Texarkana, Arkansas, bluebirds can also help children (and adults) who have experienced trauma or abuse learn to cope with tragedy and loss.