

BAYOU BLUEBIRD NEST NEWS

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KLEINPETER FARMS DAIRY BLUEBIRD TRAIL

Developing the Kleinpeter Farm and Woods Bluebird Trails

By Kenny Kleinpeter

Last year, my father, Ben Kleinpeter approached me about setting up a bluebird trail on a 500-acre tract in St. Helena Parish, about 40 miles north east of Baton Rouge, La. This is the site of Kleinpeter Dairy Farm, an active 300-cow milking operation. The first and primary concern was developing a network of nestboxes that wouldn't interfere with the dairy business. Nestboxes would have to be placed out of the way of tractors and nest checks would have to be conducted without disrupting cows or personnel. The lack of pesticide or herbicide use on a dairy farm also made this agricultural enterprise more compatible for wildlife like bluebirds. Many of the pastures are perfectly suited for bluebirds since they are used for cow grazing.

In the fall of 2004, a site evaluation was done. It was a good sign to find some nestboxes already in place from previous farm managers. Unfortunately, the boxes were nailed to trees and fence posts and some had several layers of nests along with un-hatched eggs. However, the property was ideal habitat with pastures interspersed with thick woods - a bluebird's dream-come-true.



Kenny used a fence mount to place boxes in the Dairy's pastures, protecting the boxes from damage from the herd.

The only down-side was the large amount of starlings and sparrows that fed on the grain used to feed cows around the barns. That was going to be a big challenge!

This dairy farm included mostly acreage used for cattle grazing with relatively little planting. Pastures are designed to hold small groups of dairy cattle in various conditions and stages of development. These pastures are quite small, about 20 acres each, providing about 10 linear miles of fencing. Realizing that cows would destroy free-standing nestboxes, a system of fence-mounted nestbox poles seemed the only possibility.

I noticed in the Bluebird Monitor's Guide that nestboxes had been devised that were wrapped in barbed-wire to prevent cows from interfering with them. I contacted co-author, Keith Kridler about other possible strategies and he told me about suspending the nestbox poles on the strands of barbed-wire between fence posts. He further suggested that this method would also serve as a built-in predator guard since no ground predator can make the cognitive connection between climbing a pole, traveling laterally across the barbed-wire and then, climbing the nestbox pole to reach the nestbox. Further, mammals like cats and raccoons will not make the painful walk across barbed-wire. I decided to use 5 foot lengths of $\frac{3}{4}$ " conduit for the poles. With a nestbox mounted at the top, the pole was "weaved" through the strands of barbed-wire keeping it from falling front or back. In the bottom of each pole, a $\frac{3}{4}$ " slit was grinded out that served to seat the pole into one of the lower strands of barbed-wire. Finally, 12" pieces of 16 gauge wire were wrapped around the nestbox pole and secured the upper strands of barbed-wire. This allowed the pole to be raised or lowered for nest checks or set for various heights.

I obtained an aerial photograph of the farm along with a map of the fences and barns and set out to plot the nestbox locations. Theoretically, with boxes placed 100 yards apart, over 200 boxes could be accommodated. Working closely with LBBS president, Evelyn Cooper, this trail was made possible by the great effort of her husband, Clayton and LBBS members, Cecil Tarver, Jimmie Orr, Jack Hoover and David Crockett who cut and assembled all of the nestboxes. On a cold November day, I drove up to Delhi and loaded up a U-Haul trailer with 191 nestboxes and brought them back down to Baton Rouge. I prepared all of the poles and set out to mount them.

For five separate trips out to the farm, I mounted about 20 boxes at a time. Even though it was the "dead of winter," on many days, I would see several flocks of bluebirds throughout the property. It was such a delight and reassurance to have them seemingly follow me around the farm.

It did not take me long to learn that "theoretical" box placement was much different from realistic placement! In the center of property are the buildings including milking parlor, barns (called free stalls) and silos. The method of feeding the 300 milk cows is to drop grain along the open-air stalls under these huge barns. This method provides a free meal to hundreds of starlings and house sparrows that are constantly around.

Any boxes within 100' of these buildings are attractive only to sparrows (starlings cannot negotiate the 1-1/2" entrances). Also, some of the fencing had become over-grown and could not accommodate boxes. While I was at it, I also placed three wood duck boxes along the five-acre lake.

One of the biggest challenges of this trail was understanding the behavior of the cows. I quickly discovered that if you add a nestbox to a pasture with cows, they will become obsessively interested in doing everything they possibly can to interact with that new object - up to and including total destruction. I found many boxes literally in pieces on the ground. They were repaired and replaced until the cows finally accepted them. Because cows are frequently moved from one pasture to another, I soon discovered that when cows are introduced to a pasture, they are not interested in nestboxes that are already there. So, over time (thankfully, not during the nesting season!), the boxes have gradually being ignored.

Also, one thing to remember on a dairy farm is to never, ever turn your back on a bull. Dairy bulls are notoriously mean-spirited. They can never be trusted and I always respect them! While many of the nestboxes can be checked without entering a pasture, the temptation to increase the number of boxes was too much and many did require entering pastures. Bulls are the worst offenders in destroying boxes but, since they generally stay in the same pasture, I simply had to avoid them. After two months of moving, removing, repairing and adjusting boxes, I finally settled on an even 100 boxes. To check every box, I drive most of the farm but walk several parts and it takes me about four hours.

My first check took place on February 15, 2005. It was then that I found a bluebird nest about 20% complete near the barns. After initial excitement, I also found that a sparrow had taken over the box as a male bluebird perched helplessly nearby. I realized that my work was just beginning. I attached one of my Van Ert insert nestbox traps and caught the offending male sparrow immediately. I also noticed that boxes around the barns were beginning to be claimed by sparrows instead of bluebirds. I "put two and two together" and decided to turn several of the nestboxes into nothing but sparrow traps. I ordered extra Van Ert traps and replaced the 1-12" entrances with 1-3/8" entrances to discourage bluebirds. These trap boxes have been placed around the perimeter of the barns where bluebirds are seldom seen. Many sparrows (mainly, males) have been caught already. I am cautiously optimistic at this point since no sparrow nests have been found in any boxes.



I have committed to checking the farm trail each week. My last nest check to date was on March 2, when I discovered two complete nests and two partial nests. The 2005 season is well underway!

At left is a view of a nextbox located near the Dairy's Barn.



At left: One of Kenny's many nestboxes along the Kleinpeter Farms Dairy Woods Trail that is already in use.

UPCOMING EVENTS

LBBS NESTBOX WORKSHOP (BATON ROUGE AREA) -- LOUISIANA BAYOU BLUEBIRD SOCIETY will conduct a Bluebird Nestbox Workshop on Saturday, May 7, 2005, at the Waddill Wildlife Refuge Center, 4142 North Flannery Road, Baton Rouge, LA from 10:00 AM until 12:00 Noon to learn to construct and monitor nestboxes (supplied nestboxes limited to 25 along with a year's membership to LBBS). Registration fee is \$15.00. To register, call (318) 878-3210, (225) 752-2139, or e-mail emcooper@bayou.com.

LBBS 2005 SPRING EVENT -- Louisiana Bayou Bluebird Society invites you to its Spring Celebration on Saturday, May 7, 2005 at Waddill Wildlife Refuge Center, 4142 North Flannery Road, Baton Rouge, LA from 2:00 PM until 4:30 PM. Kenny Kleinpeter, vice president of LBBS and LBBS 2004 Bluebirder of the Year, bluebird trail monitor and purple martin expert will be the guest speaker. He will speak on attracting and managing secondary cavity nesters with emphasis on bluebirds, martins and wood ducks. The public is invited to attend and there is no admission charge.

2004 NESTBOX SUMMARY

	#OF NESTBOXES	EGGS LAID	HATCHED	FLEDGED
Eastern Bluebird	1,144	5,502	4,401	2,297
Carolina Wren	30	245	137	136
C. Chickadees	56	294	279	279
Purple Martin	19	832	541	426
House Sparrow	1	2	2	0
Titmouse	1	1	1	1

People participating are: Clay Green, Kenny Kleinpeter, Cecil Tarver, Bobbie Boykin, Barbara Hargrove, Jack and Deb Hoover, Travis Freeman, Don Studer, Paula Gates, Dennis LaBatt, James Dean, Leo Terzia, and Evelyn Cooper. Thanks to each of these.

SETTING THE BOX WHEN AND WHERE

It's spring and a pair of bluebirds is prospecting around your yard. You have a box, and you want to put it up in a hurry. Why not just nail it to a tree? At all costs, resist the temptation to bang a box onto the nearest tree or fence post. Mounting your bluebird box properly will save you future expense and heartache and possibly save the lives of the bluebirds.

It's hard to beat an 8-foot length of $\frac{3}{4}$ - inch (inside diameter) galvanized pipe (available at lumberyards or plumbing supply and hardware stores) for mounting bluebird boxes. When you mount a box on a free-standing pipe, you free yourself to put it wherever you like, in the best place for bluebirds. It won't rot like wood, and its small diameter makes it easy to mount predator baffles. If you need to grease the pole to stop climbing ants, you can wipe off old and apply new grease on the non-absorbent metal. The 8-foot length lets you sink two feet in the ground, and mount the box at eye level, which makes it easy to check. Even pipe, however, affords no protection from climbing raccoons or snakes, so you'll need to fit it with a baffle.

There are a few ground rules for sitting a bluebird box. Most important is to keep the box as far away from shrubbery and tree-lines as possible. House Wrens, which are highly destructive competitors for boxes, are reluctant to cross open spaces. If possible, site the box 100 feet or more away from cover. Bluebirds greatly appreciate additional perches in vast expanses; these perches can simply be stakes or tree limbs stuck in the ground. Adding a few places to perch can enhance a box's attractiveness at no expense.

Mount the box about five feet off the ground, or so that the bottom of the box is at your eye level. This is high enough to foil most leaping cats, and low enough to make it easy for you to monitor nests. The baffle should go right under the box. Face the box away from prevailing winds, which generally means facing it south. If you need to fudge a little to make it easy to see the hole, the birds won't mind.

Although bluebirds appreciate boxes year-round, you'll want to have them up by February in the south and March in the north, to catch the eye of returning migrants. Keep in mind that in the winter, bluebirds often roost in boxes. I use flexible putty weather stripping to caulk all ventilation holes, and I don't remove it until the weather is reliably warm. It's vital that the box stay dry inside at all times, for even an attentive bluebird mother can't save eggs or young in a soaked, cold nest.

It's a great idea to have a spare box or two on hand. If wrens, sparrows, or swallows oust your bluebirds, if an old box becomes soaked, or if another bluebird pair shows up where you have but one house, you can quickly erect a spare. Where tree swallows are abundant, you may wish to pair your boxes 15 to 25 feet apart.

(Article Copied from Bird Watchers Digest)

(Note: A 6 ft. T post can be used and is much less expensive. Stovepipe and metal cone guards fit nicely over them.

House Wrens do not nest in LA, but other cavity nesters can take the boxes if they are too close to bushes and trees.)

BLUEBIRDS ALONG THE BAYOUS

Three new trails have been established across our state. They are:

KLEINPETER FARMS DAIRY BLUEBIRD TRAIL, 100 nestboxes, Pine Grove, Monitor, Kenny Kleinpeter;

TRENTON STREET GOLF COURSE BLUEBIRD TRAIL, 8 nestboxes West Monroe, Monitors Paula and Richard Gates, Jane and Jerry Beauregard and Don Studer;

LE OXBOW BAYOU BLUEBIRD TRAIL, Waverly, 5 nestboxes, Monitor Don French;

SPONSORING HODGES GARDENS BLUEBIRD TRAIL, Many, established by Dr. Shirl Brunell, Texarkana, AR 21 nestboxes, Monitors Linda Chance and helpers.

PRESENTATION given to Wisner Garden Club members, Evelyn Cooper;

PRESENTATION AND NESTBOX WORKSHOP, Lake Providence Garden Club, Instructors: Jimmie and Brenda Orr, and Evelyn Cooper.

FROM THE PERCH

Our SPRING CELEBRATION is just around the corner! Waddill Wildlife Refuge Center is a lovely place to have our meeting on May 7th. You will most certainly enjoy our featured speaker, Kenny Kleinpeter. Come have fun with us! Our nesting season is in full swing and you can learn so many things at our meetings.

LBBS BLUEBIRD SEMINAR WEEKEND AT HODGES GARDENS!!

LBBS has been given the opportunity to further the work of the bluebird trail at Hodges Gardens established by Dr. Shirl Brunell, of Texarkana, AR. A workday will be held Friday, April 22, to rehab the trail and install predator guards, replace nestboxes as needed, add two new complete units to the main garden, and install a permanent LBBS sign.

On Saturday, April 23, LBBS will be conducting a Nestbox Workshop at 10:00 AM, followed by a presentation on Bluebirding Basics by Evelyn Cooper and Sheryl Bassi. Everyone is invited to attend! If you'd like to join in the workday, give Evelyn a call at (318) 878-3210.