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Our Gift to Wild Birds and Theirs to Us

I asked my daughter, Amanda, and our friend, Leiza, "Will you walk up the edge of the meadow and see how many bluebird houses you can clean out while I get what we need to put up the owl houses?"

They both said, "Sure."

Amanda asked, "What do bluebirds do in the wild? Who cleans out their natural nests for them?"

I said, "Nobody. Woodpeckers hollow out cavities in dead trees. When the woodpeckers finish with a cavity, bluebirds or other cavity dwellers move into the abandoned apartment. There used to be plenty of dead trees and plenty of abandoned cavities, so when bluebirds filled a cavity too full of nesting materials, they found another, and someone else used the one they abandoned.

"Humans cut down most of the dead trees. Bluebirds and other cavity dwellers had to really look to find housing. People figured out what the birds needed and started putting up houses. Now we have to manage the dwellings so bluebirds can keep using them. People understand wildlife needs better now, and they allow more dead trees to stand. Eventually, the birds won't need as much human help with their housing. Meanwhile, we do what we can to help out."

The year before, a Girl Scout troop built 30 bluebird houses of smooth, milled wood. Boy Scouts built more bluebird houses and two screech owl houses and donated them to the Girl Scout's Magic Sky Ranch, 750 acres of forest, meadows, and dramatic granite formations in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains. We lived on the ranch and took care of it and integrated everything, living, gardening, learning into our mountain habitat.

Girl Scouts, leaders, my daughters, and two volunteers from Boy Scouts hiked up the ranch. I drove a pickup load of housing up the rough dirt road. We found appropriate trees, posts, and poles, and fastened on bluebird houses four to five feet up, where mountain bluebirds like them, facing into meadows scattered through forest and rock formations.

Pastel-blue bluebirds fill the houses partway with sticks and grass and lay and hatch their eggs. They bring insects and feed their broods through the small, round openings in the front panels.

The front panels of the houses are held on with one or two screws, so they are easy to remove and replace. When the young leave the houses, we (my family, volunteers from the girl scouts, whoever is available and willing to do the work) remove the front panels, clean out the houses, and put them back together. We carry the material from inside the houses away and scatter it on the meadow so predators don't locate bluebird houses through refuse left below them.

When we keep the houses ready, the birds raise two or three broods of bluebirds through the summer and return next year and use the houses again. If we don't clean them out, they get too full, and the birds won't use them again.

Bluebird houses are easy to put up. The owl houses Amanda and Leiza and I fastened into trees are birds of a different feather. People who study screech owls say the owls like their house about thirteen feet up. We ran out of time the weekend the scouts came up to the ranch and put houses up, but eventually, Amanda and Leiza helped me finish putting up houses.

I got what we needed from the shop and picked it up and took it down to the meadow. I placed the ladder in the old Ponderosa pine close to Lone Pine Creek just as Leiza and Amanda returned from cleaning out twenty-one bluebird houses. I climbed the ladder, and they encouraged me from the ground, where dense, dead grass from last year lay flat and started to become soil. New spring green grass grew up through the dead grass. I nailed the wooden house to the tree. I swung the hammer upside down, left handed. Driving the nail became a matter of coaxing it in a tiny bit at a time, not because left-handed and very awkward for a right-handed man is the stylish way to nail up screech owl houses, but because that was the only way I could reach the nail from where I could place the ladder solidly enough to have some hope it would stay up until I finished the job.

Amanda left to drive down the mountain and join a friend for lunch. Far up the ranch, Leiza and I placed the ladder in another pine tree. Leiza climbed the ladder and nailed the second owl house into place. She started to apologize for how long it was taking her. I said, "The first one took me a long time, remember? We don't have a clock running on this job."

The owls pay the same rent if we finish in two minutes or two hours.”

When the owl house was handsomely in place, ready for occupancy, I said, “I hope some fine feathered friend finds it and likes the way we’ve set it up.” We drove back down the ranch, slowly, because the dirt road was rough, but even more because sunshine in the forest and meadows said “linger and see the afternoon in the mountains.”

Two bluebirds flew across the road ahead of us and landed on an old, rail fence. Neither of us said anything, but we knew the birds paid their rent just by being there. Seeing them, blue as mountain sky, as beautiful as mountain bluebirds in sunshine, with places to live and continue their species, was generous payment for our work.