

Donald County Park is home for bluebirds



The Eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), a small thrush of open woods and orchards, is a cavity nester. Both male and female tend the nest and care for the young.



1 2



3 4



Thanks to Friends of Donald Park volunteers, bluebirds enjoy a home at Donald County Park.

THE EASTERN BLUEBIRD'S NEAR DEMISE

Once plentiful, this gentle native American bird plummeted toward extinction between the 1920s and 1970s. Bluebirds were affected by habitat decline, as agricultural crops supplanted native savannas. Preferred nesting spaces—old wooden fence posts, tree cavities—disappeared. There was intense competition by aggressive, often non-native birds, and agricultural chemicals had deadly effects.

VOLUNTEERS HELPED ENSURE RECOVERY

Beginning in the 1930s, decades-long efforts—largely by passionate volunteers—brought the bluebird back from near extinction. At first, a few individuals created nest boxes and established “bluebird trails,” raising awareness of the need to save this species. By mid-century, national

and regional organizations had developed a large-scale restoration effort, while scientific studies improved nest box design and installation. The late 20th century saw a dramatic bluebird population recovery.

BLUEBIRDS AT DONALD COUNTY PARK

You'll find bluebird trails throughout the park, thanks to Friends of Donald Park volunteers who carry on a tradition started by park co-founder Pat Hitchcock in the 1980s. As a result of volunteer efforts, as many as 100 bluebirds have fledged in a season at the park. At the Friends website (donaldpark.org), learn more about eastern bluebirds and how *you* can get involved—through volunteering or making your own bluebird nest box!

- ▲ 1 Bluebirds have as many as three clutches in a season. Donald Park clutches average four chicks per box—among the highest in Dane County.
- 2 During your visit, watch for bluebirds fluttering to the ground from a low-hanging branch. Does one emerge with an insect in its beak? Insects form the bulk of the bluebird's diet, supplemented by wild fruits, earthworms, spiders, centipedes and sow bugs.
- 3 Tree swallows (*Iridoprocne bicolor*) also use nest boxes. Like bluebirds, they eat large quantities of insects and are considered a beneficial species.
- 4 A Friends volunteer shows school children an old nest from an unoccupied nest box. Volunteers monitor nest boxes throughout spring and summer, regularly checking for black flies (which can kill chicks) and cleaning out old nests after chicks fledge.

IMAGE CREDITS Bluebirds in flight: Michael Smith. Chicks: Ray Glew. Fledgling: Ray Glew. Tree swallow: Richard Armstrong. Nestbox: Don Hartman. Bluebird on branch: Pat Ready.