

## National Elk Refuge News - October 25, 2016

*New Bluebird Boxes Improve Nesting Opportunities*



*Maclain, Alex, and Rilynn Smith walk along the North Highway 89 multi-use pathway with a half dozen of the new bluebird boxes.*

Fifty-two new houses went up on the National Elk Refuge last week – 52 bird houses, that is. The new nesting boxes are the result of a community partnership dedicated to wildlife conservation and an ambitious Eagle Scout candidate with a love for birds.

A series of wooden boxes dot the Refuge's western boundary, making up the largest registered Mountain Bluebird trail in the continental United States. Since 2004, volunteers from the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation have maintained the bluebird trail by checking boxes, recording use, and cleaning the boxes between broods. The foundation's Bluebird Nest Box Project's goal is to provide nesting sites for the cavity nesting birds in order to mitigate

for habitat loss. "As cottonwoods, aspens, and other riparian vegetation decrease throughout the Jackson Hole valley, so do breeding opportunities for cavity nesting species like the Mountain Bluebird," explained Jon Mobeck, Executive Director for the nonprofit organization.

Over time, many of the bluebird boxes have deteriorated. Rotted wood, missing parts, and large cracks were becoming all too common, and the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation staff was beginning discussions on how to replace so many of the trail's 104 boxes. A timely inquiry by a visiting family from Utah solved the problem and led to a volunteer project that came to fruition this past weekend.



*A bluebird box, missing its lid, shows signs of wear.*



*Mountain Bluebird Nest Box Project Coordinator Tim Griffith demonstrates how to install the boxes.*

Maclain Smith, age 14, has been interested in birds ever since his family lived in Kentucky. “We had a bird feeder outside a window at our home, and we started keeping a log of the kinds of birds we’d see,” Maclain said. “That was the spark that led to my interest in learning more.” The family moved back to Utah after a few years, but Maclain’s love of birds remained with him and continued to grow.

On a trip to the Jackson Hole valley two years ago, the bluebird boxes on the Refuge fence caught the eye of the Smith family. They stopped in at the Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center, located on the National Elk Refuge, to learn more about the abundance of boxes. They were directed to contact staff at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation. There, they came up with a plan to replace half of the boxes, an effort that may lead to Maclain earning the highest achievement or rank attainable in the Boy Scouts of America: an Eagle Scout award.

Maclain, who has been with Scouts

“for as long as I can remember,” decided to make the replacement of the bluebird boxes become the focus of his Eagle Scout project. He secured sponsors to provide materials and costs, including both a Lowe’s home improvement store and his church affiliation. When the materials were obtained, he enlisted help from his troop to construct the boxes. “No one lost a finger,” he added with a smile.

Last weekend, friends and family accompanied Maclain as he



*The first of the brood emerges in one of the bluebird boxes. Photo credit: Shelley Sundgren, Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation.*

completed his field work. Though there’s still some paperwork involved and a presentation to make in front of a Scout Council before his Eagle Scout work is done, Maclain is proud of his undertaking and anxious to stay involved. “I hope to come back up at least once a year to check on the boxes,” he said.

More information on the Bluebird Nest Box Project can be found on the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation’s web site at <http://bit.ly/2f59E55>.

Learn more about Mountain Bluebirds from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at <http://bit.ly/2dGustL>.

