

Bluebirds find happiness in Lil Files' Tyngsboro yard

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Sun Correspondent

(Editor's note: On Sunday, Sept. 20, Tyngsboro resident Lillian Lund Files of the North American Bluebird Society will lecture on bluebirds at 7:30 p.m., in the School of Philosophy, located behind the Alcott family's Orchard House, Lexington Road, Concord.)

TYNGSBORO — The bluebird is one of the best-loved of all our songbirds, but few get to see one. Its bright colors and "song of happiness" bring joy to all who see and watch the antics of this small creature of the field and sky. But they are scarce.

No wonder the naturalist Henry David Thoreau wrote 180 years ago that it "carries the sky on its back and the earth on its breast."

The song of the bluebird is a delicate purling warble which seems to say, "Dear, dear. Think of it, think of it." They are considered the first sign of spring when they arrive and are a symbol of love, hope and happiness.

Young people perhaps have never seen a bluebird, once so common 50 years ago. Now, even avid birdwatchers rarely get a glimpse of this cheerful feathered friend in these parts any more.

Its nesting place in the past have been mostly in hollows in apple trees; most of the orchards are now gone. Pesticides have reduced the population, it is believed.

These birds have a gentle disposition and are not fighters. Related to the robin, but only seven



Bluebird lovers

British naturalist William Condry and Mrs. Lillian Files stand beside a bluebird nesting box on Scribner

Hill, near the Westford-Tyngsboro line.

inches long including tail feathers, they are too timid to fight off competition from sparrows, wrens, and starlings as they compete for nesting space in the early spring.

At Windswept, a delightful home atop Scribner Hill near the Westford-Tyngsboro line, there lives an energetic lady who is a dedicated devotee of the bluebird. She is Mrs. Lillian Files, but prefers to be called just Lil. She lectures on the life and habits of

these winged beauties.

In the winter, she makes dimensionally correct boxes for her friends. The entrance hole must be exactly one and one-half inches to prevent the entrance of unwanted competitors, mostly starlings and house sparrows.

Unusual in these days, she has successfully "raised" bluebirds the past three decades. Some years are bonus ones, others bad. This summer, two pairs have nested in her yard, producing 14

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youngsters. One pair had a clutch of five, then four; the second, a family of five.

This summer, William Condry of Wales, a distinguished naturalist in Great Britain, was guest speaker at the annual Thoreau Society's conference in Concord. He has long been active in the international nature conservation movement in his country as a writer, broadcaster and lecturer on wild animals, fossils, birds and plants. He is warden of a nature reserve owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Wales.

Before coming to this country, he had made a list of birds he had hoped to see in the Bay State. Topping the list was the bluebird, but he was told before leaving that he'd never find one in Massachusetts.

During his 10-day visit to this state, he "birded" at some of the area's best sanctuaries. As had his long-time mentor, Thoreau, canoed the Concord River, Condry did but a century later.

Lil Files said, "Bluebird is a magic word in this area and word

gets around fast when you have any in your region." At that time, her two pairs and their young were very active.

A fellow Thoreauvian, knowing of Condry's ambition, brought him to Westford. En route he reported to his guide that he felt like he was in "search of the Holy Grail."

When the couple arrived, Mrs. Files explained, "we all took a walk into the field next to our home. We stopped near one of the boxes holding a young family — and we were soon rewarded. A male bird landed on top of the box, a grasshopper in his beak for one of the nestlings."

"At this moment, with binoculars still up, this reserved man from Wales got so excited he took me by surprise by giving me a big hug. Imagine what the sight of a bluebird can do for some people."

"I got my bloody bluebird after all," the visitor blurted.

From Windswept there is a most rewarding panoramic view of the foothills of New Hampshire. Motorists along the country road often stop to get a glimpse of Mt. Monadnock in the Peterborough-Jaffrey area some 35 miles to the west, as well as lesser elevations in the Hollis range.

During tea, they discussed these hills and Condry reminded his hosts that not only Thoreau, but Emerson had scaled them on several occasions. "Seeing the bluebirds and Mt. Monadnock made my day," he commented.

Before leaving, he autographed his latest book, "Pathway to the Wild," as follows: "To Lil Files, for bringing back the bluebirds, with best wishes — and thank you for an unforgettable bluebird experience."

Mrs. Files manages the office of her husband's road machinery

equipment company in East Acton. Nevertheless, she had found time to organize the Tyngsboro Bird Society, and is a director for New England in the North American Bluebird Society.

Her group in Tyngsboro, with several Westford participants, have placed 540 boxes designed for bluebirds in this area. She purchased a moped so that she could observe many of these from time to time during the season.

When you observe Lil stopping along the roadside or in a field, pause for a moment. You, too, may see a flash of blue and hear a sweet song. Look closer. If the object has feathers on its back, head, wings and tail of a bright, clear shade of blue; if its breast is a bright chestnut-brown and its belly grey-white, you behold a rarity — a North American bluebird in Massachusetts.

A rarity, true, but not extinct — especially if Lil Files has her way.

Unusual in these days, she has successfully "raised" bluebirds the past three decades. Some years are bonus ones, others bad. This summer, two pairs have nested in her yard, producing 14 youngsters. One pair had a clutch of five, then four; the second, a family of five.