

History of the Vredenburg Bluebird Trail



The following article was written by the late Jeanne Crawford, pictured on the left and was printed in the Yakima Herald-Republic – exact date unknown but likely in late 1995 given the number of 386 young bluebirds mentioned in the first sentence.

Volunteers reap success of Wenas bluebird trail

By Jeanne Crawford

Special to the Herald-Republic

An estimated 386 young bluebirds are now wintering in areas south of here – in both eastern and western Oregon, eastern Nevada, eastern California, even perhaps in northern Mexico – fledged from the 125 nesting boxes made available to their parents by the Yakima Valley Audubon Society.

Since 1982, the society has maintained a 15-mile long bluebird trail along Wenas Road beginning where the road's pavement ends and continuing to its junction with Durr Road.

Virginia Vredenburg and her late husband, Harold, put out the first boxes in 1981. "The first time I looked into a bluebird box and saw those darling little birds, it was love at first sight," she recalled.



Harold and Virginia Vredenburg photo courtesy of Keith Powers, Virginia's son.

Following the lead of the late Bill Thoren, a birder who had found the Wenas area similar to the Montana he had left and who put out the first bluebird boxes, the Vredenburghs and other Auduboners spent a cold, wintry day in an Oak Creek Game Range barn building boxes. In spring 1982, they put out 58 homes for the songbirds.

In 1994, the Wenas trail was re-named the Vredenburg Bluebird Trail in honor of the couple.

According to Vredenburg, who is the continuing trail chairman, there are two species of bluebirds in this area, the mountain and western. Male mountain bluebirds are all blue and male westerns are blue with rusty breasts. Females of both species are dressed in more subdued colors.

The western bluebirds prefer trees. The first half of the Wenas Bluebird Trail is at lower elevation, around 2,000 feet, where trees are plentiful.

The mountain bluebirds choose a more open habitat, offered at the easterly end of the trail at about 2,500 feet.

Bluebirds begin their return to the Wenas the last week in February, according to Vredenburg. The last Saturday of March is traditionally set aside for Audubon members to go en masse to the Wenas area to repair boxes and install new ones where necessary.

From the end of April to mid-August, weekly monitoring is shared by members who check each box, trying not to frighten sitting birds while counting eggs and, later, the hatched babies.

Bob Boekelheide, wildlife biologist, banded bluebirds, including the tiniest chicks, over a period of several years and found that they do indeed return to nesting boxes within a few hundred yards of where they had previously nested or had hatched.

The bluebird trail is a major project of the Audubon Society. The houses are "rented" to subscribers, two years for \$5. More than 100 of them are currently leased out, many to Western Washington Auduboners.

In addition to the Audubon Society's Vredenburg trail, there are six additional ones, privately maintained and monitored by bird lovers who "just want their own project," Vredenburg said.

The six trails include more than 200 boxes, about half of them in the Wenas, the others along Chinook Pass highway and the South Fork of the Ahtanum.

Vredenburg also tallies the totals from these trails. In 1995, 597 bluebirds were fledged from these nests, making a grand total of 983 fledged bluebirds.

Complete records of the past 14 years are in Vredenburg's files: box number, its renter, how many eggs laid, how many baby birds hatched, how many fledged, how many times the nest was used.

Her complete 1995 report appears in the October issue of the Society's monthly newsletter, The Calliope Crier.

According to Birder Andy Stepniewski, the bluebird trail project has increased available habitat for the nesting birds.

The birds would have no other place to go, he said, as all available habitat is occupied. He said that both species have declined greatly over most of their ranges because of loss of natural cavities for nesting, logging operations and removal of snags. Many remaining nesting cavities have been taken over by the aggressive starling, he said.