

Bella Vista Bluebird Society

Leon Wehmeyer

Bella Vista is a 36,000 acre (56 square mile) recreational community and retirement city located in the Ozark Mountains in extreme northwestern Arkansas. It is bound on the north by the Missouri state line and on the south by Bentonville, which is the headquarters for Walmart. Bella Vista was created in the mid-1960s by Cooper Communities, Inc. It grew to a population of 16,000 and in 2007 left its "village" status and became a "city" that has since grown to over 28,000.

Besides the natural hills, lakes, streams, and trees that attract many wildlife species-including birds-Bella Vista by 1979 contained three 18-hole golf courses.

A group of Bella Vista residents concerned about the decline in Eastern Bluebird populations, and familiar with NABS's efforts to help conserve them, decided that with this habitat and the golf courses they should form a club to increase the bluebird population in Bella Vista.

Charles Nelson, after reading an article in Parade Sunday magazine titled "Where Have All the Bluebirds Gone," promoted the idea of establishing bluebird trails on the golf courses. With their wide open areas, nearby trees and bushes, and pristine grass fairways and rough, the courses are havens for insects, the main food source for bluebirds. Nelson approached Charlotte Martin to set up the trails and The Bella Vista Bluebird Society (BVBBS) was thus set in motion. The Society held its first meeting on February 1, 1980. It was chaired by Charlotte Martin and attended by 13 other citizens. This meeting was held to organize the group. All work was done by volunteers, including recruiting monitors and electing Charles Nelson as the first president.

The next order of business was to get permission from the Property Owners Association (POA) to install boxes on the golf courses. At this time the golf operations had no yardage markers of any sort. The Bluebird Society came up with a plan to place the nestboxes at intervals of 100, 150, and 200 yards on each side of the fairway in order to provide these markers. The POA thought this was a great idea and gave the society permission to start installing boxes.

In 1980 the society installed 75 nestboxes on the three golf courses that were in operation. In this first year, 150 bluebirds were fledged. At this time Bella Vista was a small village of approximately 1,500 people. From this small beginning of three golf courses, Bella Vista grew to a population of 28,000, seven golf courses, seven lakes, and became a city in 2007.

This growth also benefitted the BVBBS. As the city grew, BVBBS kept pace by adding boxes as each new golf course was opened. From its beginnings with 75 nesting boxes on three golf courses, by 1990 BVBBS had grown to 304 nestboxes on five golf courses, an annual fledging rate of about 1000, and a total fledging of 6,712 bluebirds. By 1995 Bella Vista had seven golf courses and the Bluebird Society had grown to 335 nestboxes, an annual fledging rate of about 1150, and a total fledging of 12,135 bluebirds.

Shorter trails were also added, the last in 2010 being the addition of a trail around Lake Bella Vista in observance of our 30th anniversary.

Charles Nelson is recognized as the founder of the BVBBS, and he was active until the early 2000s. He served four years as president, plus many more years as Publicity Manager and other critical roles. His dedication to bluebird conservation was the driving force behind the early successes of the society, and he was so honored by NABS in 1999 with their award for "Outstanding contribution to the field of Bluebird Conservation." This was at the 1999 NABS convention at Great Falls, Montana. Nelson was unable to attend because of failing health, but his plaque was presented to him by Jim Janssen, the President of BVBBS at that time.

Another key person in the early years of BVBBS besides Martin and Nelson was Lela Sandfort.

Lela, beginning in 1981, was in charge of monitors including recruiting, training, gathering reports, and whatever the society needed from her. She herself monitored during this time and continued doing so until 2013 when she reached the age of 100. She still is available for recruiting monitors and for giving advice to BVBBS members, with a very sharp memory of those years. She turned 103 on March 10, 2016.

In 1994, Jim Janssen took over as president of the society, having already served since 1990 as Monitor & Trail Boss. He continued as president for 22 years until 2015, when he chose to step down. Jim's dedication to bluebird conservation, like that of his mentor Charles Nelson, carried the BVBBS through those 25 years. He also was honored, in 2005, by the "Daughters of the American Revolution" in recognition of Outstanding Achievement for Environmental Awareness.

In 1990, the BVBBS recommended to the Bella Vista Village Pride Committee that the bluebird be named Bella Vista's "Official Bird." The committee endorsed this recommendation, but as they did when it named the dogwood the official tree and the crepe myrtle the official bush, they asked property owners to vote on the status via balloting in the Weekly Vista newspaper. Results of that balloting ran 8-to-1 in favor of the Eastern Bluebird. Other birds nominated were the Northern Cardinal, the American Goldfinch, and an unnamed "hunting bird." Several years later, the bluebird was also named the official bird of the Bella Vista Garden Club.

By 2005 the Bluebird Society had installed 408 nestboxes on the seven golf courses and on small trails at churches, recreation areas, and the cemetery. Fledging grew from 12,135 in 1995 to 25,270 in 2005, with annual rates of about 1500. Bella Vista at that time, because of the large number of bluebird fledglings and the small area that has produced these figures, considered itself "The Bluebird Capital of the USA." True or not, we do feel that fledging 1500 bluebirds annually in that small an area is an accomplishment to be proud of.

From 2005 to 2015 the society increased its nestboxes to 425 and fledglings to 42,504, with annual rates increasing to about 1750. In addition to the bluebird fledglings in 2015, the nestboxes produced 597 Tree Swallows, 81 chickadees, 31 wrens, and 10 titmice. We occasionally even produce Prothonotary Warbler fledglings, including 4 in 2015. The chart on the next page shows total number of bluebirds

fledged and number of boxes from 1980 to 2015. As of now, the BVBBS has two people building nestboxes, 34 monitors, and eight Trail Bosses (Maintenance).

The BVBBS has operated through the years with only volunteer help. Our main source of income comes from building boxes and guards and installing them in Bella Vista neighborhoods. These neighborhoods contribute up to 400 additional bluebirds fledged each year. On several occasions, usually when flooding from the many streams running through the golf courses destroys our box sets, the POA/City of Bella Vista has generously donated some money to help us replace those boxes.

All in all, we are a proud group of bluebird conservationists here in Bella Vista that we feel has done our part in increasing the population of these beautiful and delightful little birds. Leon Wehmeyer is in his second year as President of the Bella Vista Bluebird Society, preceded by 12 years with the society as Monitor & Trail Boss on several golf course trails. He was an avid birdwatcher after his first field trip in Calgary, Alberta, in May 1989. His birding has played a central role in his being in every U.S. state (Hawaii excepted) and every Canadian province. He is now retired and limits his birding to backyard birds and the bluebirds.

