

A PASSION FOR BLUEBIRDS

By Bob Niebuhr

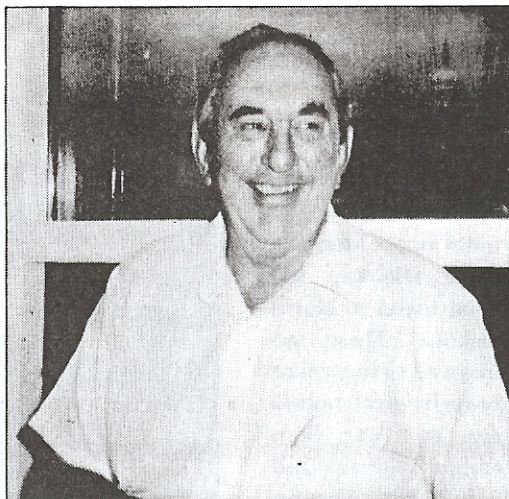
Art Aylesworth, the "Bluebird Man" was a bigger than life kind of guy, and fun to be around. A raw boned man who always had a smile on his face, a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle in his voice.

I first met Art at a party in 1975. I had been hearing about Art for years from my hunting and fishing partner who had hunted and fished with Art. The stories weren't about bluebirds, but the typical hunting and fishing stories and the goose nests Art and other volunteers were building and putting out in the Mission Valley in western Montana.

Art had noticed that Canadian Geese would nest near irrigation ponds in the early spring when the water was low, but when the run off came out of the mountains to fill the ponds it would flood the nests. Art's group built nesting platforms in the ponds so they would be above the high water mark. Their efforts were a phenomenal success and today thousands of geese are raised in the valley each year.

I had heard Art mention building nestboxes for bluebirds, but it wasn't until the spring of 1981 that I learned about his dedication to bluebird conservation. A friend and I went to Ronan to learn about the goose nests and ask Art if he would bring one to Great Falls to display at our Ducks Unlimited dinner. We spent twenty minutes looking at goose nests and the next two hours driving around his bluebird trail hearing about the plight of the bluebird and his bluebird conservation efforts in western Montana.

When he and his friend, Arnie Armstrong, showed up at the Ducks Unlimited dinner, they brought a goose nest, but they had bluebird nestboxes, too, and Art had asked Duncan Macintosh, a bluebirder from Lethbridge, AB to meet him at the dinner. Tom Matsko and Rod Spencer, Great Falls also attended the dinner and met Art for the first time that night and the next morning the six of us met for breakfast.

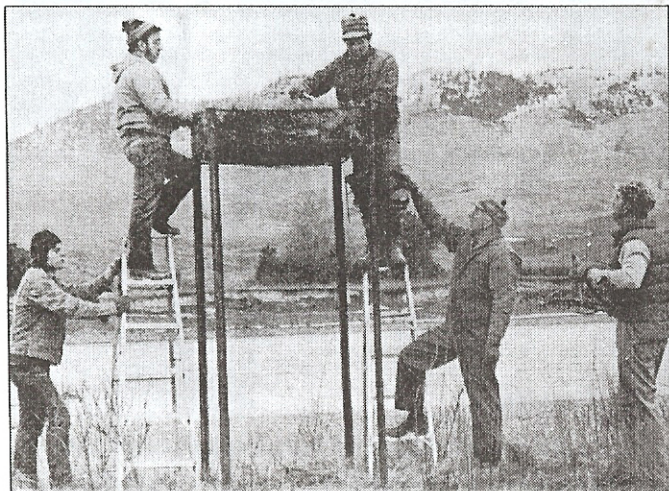


At that time the Montana group did not have a name, but the group in Alberta was called Mountain Bluebird Trails and Art and Duncan agreed to put the same name on the Montana group and the two groups worked together closely with the same name until 1994. A copy of Art's slide show was made after the meeting so the story of bluebird conservation could be told east of the Continental Divide.

Art's interest in bluebirds began in early spring 1974 when he and his wife, Vivian (pictured below), saw a flock of males sitting in a snow covered pine tree. "They looked like big blue Christmas ornaments." Art said. He remembered seeing them as a child,

but had seen very few in recent years so he built five nestboxes and one was used and fledged five. He had similar results the next couple of years, but because of his experience with these birds, he became inspired to spread the word. He got lumber mills in the area to donate scrap wood and recruited volunteers to build and put out nestboxes. By

1980, they had fledged a total of 1,000 babies. In the next 20 years Art and his MBT volunteers built over 35,000 nestboxes and delivered or sent them throughout the northwest and fledged over 200,000 bluebirds.



During the 80's, Art and Duncan Macintosh lead the campaign to get the North American Bluebird Society to recommend a larger nestbox and 1-9/16" hole for Mountain Bluebirds.



In 1989 under Art's leadership MBT built the Centennial Bluebird Trail 700 miles across Montana along Highway 200 from Idaho to North Dakota. These accomplishments brought great notoriety to Art, both within Montana and nationally. Newspapers and magazines wrote articles about him and many books mention his name. Authors consulted him on Mountain and Western Bluebirds and photographers

came from across the nation to take pictures along his trails. But Art wasn't interested in the publicity, just the preservation of his bluebirds.

Art loved Montana and all its splendor, counting himself lucky to live here. From trout fishing in the spring, to the last hunt of the fall, he embraced nearly every outdoor pursuit available and excelled at most. His appreciation for the wildlife of his home state led to his involvement in many conservation organizations. But his love for the bluebird became the passion of his later years.



Donna Hagerman writes about the extreme measures Art would go to for his bluebirds. "One late summer day in the early 1980's, Art called my dad, Clarence Hagerman, and explained his problem. He had a late brood of five abandoned baby Western Bluebirds and was looking for a foster box in which to place his little orphaned nestlings. The orphans needed to be placed with other nestlings of approximately the same age in order to expect a successful fledging of all involved.

"Fortunately, my dad kept close tabs on his northern Idaho trail, and a quick review of his records showed that he had a box which was a good match for Art's orphans. So Art

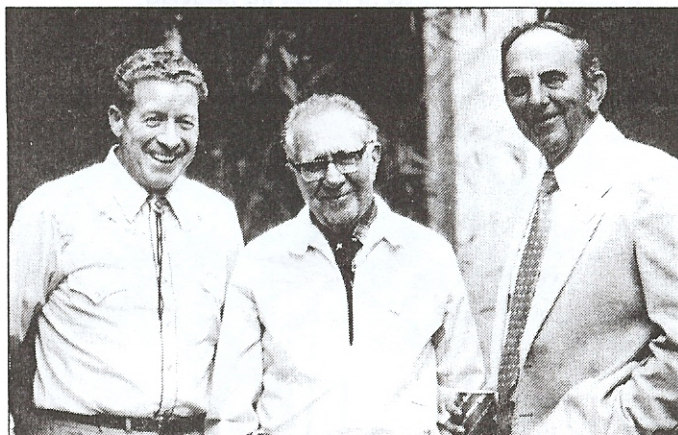


packed up his babies and met my dad at a halfway point between their homes. Each drove about 150 miles round trip for those little bluebirds! All of the nestlings fledged without a hitch, thanks to Art's determination to find a new home for his abandoned babies."

To hear Art talk about bluebirds was one thing, but to travel the back roads along a bluebird trail with him was a fascinating and memorable experience. He knew not just about bluebirds, but all the plants and creatures that inhabited their world. He was a great student of nature and loved sharing it with others. This experience taught me and others that we are part of nature, and that we, as well as the bluebirds, receive great rewards for what we do.

Besides spending countless hours promoting bluebird conservation, Art also had a very successful career in the life insurance business for over 30 years. But when the insurance interview was over, if the opportunity arose, he would put in a good word for the bluebirds and if the people seemed interested he always had a nestbox or two in the back of his pickup to get them started.

When Art was asked why he put out nestboxes for bluebirds he replied with that smile on his face and chuckle in his voice, "Because they need our help."



Duncan Macintosh, Lawrence Zeleny and Art Aylesworth

Duncan, in his travels around southern Alberta, recognized the paucity of Mountain Bluebirds and decided to do what he could to help them recover. He realized the shortage of nesting availability, changes in farming procedures, land clearing, and introduced non-native bird species were all possibly contributing to the decline of MOBL's. In 1975 he placed 43 nest-boxes in the Lethbridge vicinity. By 1978 he observed 17 nestlings fledge. Buoyed with this small success he began traveling the rural roads of southern Alberta placing boxes in any area which he thought might be suitable MOBL habitat. At the same time he was doing "Bluebird Missionary Work," he was gradually enlisting volunteers to become monitors of the miles of trails he established.



By the time of his death he had established 722 miles of trails, 4,000-plus nestboxes, with an estimated 10,000 nestlings fledged.

Duncan began banding in 1978. He had the Master Permit in his name, in 1994 he arranged to have the Master Permit transferred to Mountain Bluebird Trails Society. At this time he had 30 sub-permit banders and 60 non-bander trail monitors.

My discovery of Bluebirds was in 1981, the year after our purchase of 32 acres "away up at the end of nowhere." Several days after my first bluebird spotting, an article appeared in the *Calgary Herald* featuring the North American Bluebird Society. This item told me all about bluebirds. Like most neophytes I didn't know an Eastern from a Mountain or that there were three species, and I believed every word as gospel.

Diligently, I built my trail and boxes following the plan as given by NABS. Using 1/4 or 3/8-inch plywood, 4x4 inch outside dimension, 1-1/2 inch entry, slightly sloping roof fastened to the front by a narrow brass screw. Not easy fastening to narrow plywood without splitting same. Where the roof met the back portion, one nailed a 1/2 inch dowel to stop rain from running into the nest (ha).

I was out on my trail when to my anger and consternation a tall man with reddish hair was putting up humongous boxes between my NABS boxes. I stopped and was rather cool and standoffish. His voice came across with a strong Scottish accent. My boxes were all wrong, too small, poor thin wood, 1-1/2 inch opening, poor design, lousy roof. I was devastated that he would humble my NABS boxes. After all NABS should be a recognized standard.

This was my introduction to Duncan. He soon enhanced my humble knowledge and like his early monitors I became a confirmed disciple. I destroyed and replaced the NABS boxes with Duncan's boxes which now have become the standard box as used by most Alberta monitors.

The close ties between MBT Alberta and MBT Montana were forged by Duncan and Art Aylesworth. They fostered co-

operation, shared knowledge and jointly operated as if there were no international border. They started two-year regional rotating conventions which were alternated in venues such as Great Falls, Plains, Lethbridge and Pincher Creek. This cooperation between the two MBT's continues as a legacy to these two bluebirders. On more than one occasion Duncan told me he and Art Aylesworth had been trying to convince NABS there was more than one species of bluebirds besides Eastern. The never ending debate they waged concerning entrance hole size needed to be 1-9/16 and the interior dimensions larger. He said they (NABS) don't listen to us, so we just go ahead and do our own thing.

One of my most treasured experiences with Duncan occurred in 1989. The federal government requested a unique display by every province to celebrate Canada Day, July 1 (comparable to your July 4) in the nation's capital. Duncan was asked to represent Alberta with a display and explanation of Mountain Bluebirds. He asked me to accompany and assist him. We were set up in front of the Parliament Buildings on Capital Hill, before an estimated crowd of 100,000 who wandered around our exhibits. It was a once in a lifetime experience for me to share with my bluebird friend.

In 1992, Duncan's dedication was recognized by The Alberta Federation Naturalists Association with their annual Loran J. Goulden Memorial Award, one of the most valued awards of its kind in Alberta.

He was also a director of NABS and received the John and Nora Lane (NABS) Award in 1989.

Mountain Bluebird Trails was presented with the Province of Alberta "Emerald Award," which annually recognizes outstanding conservation contributions. Although it was in MBT's name, it was really through Duncan's dedication and labors we received same.

MBT planted a tree in Lethbridge's Henderson Rose Garden area as a living memorial to Duncan. The mayor, David B. Carpenter, spoke at the dedication and said "The loss of someone close is the most traumatic of human experiences, and this tree will grow as a permanent reminder of Duncan Mackintosh."

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