

Birds on the Farm

—Ulf Kintzel

One of the criticisms I have heard about my writing is that I can be factual but cannot write a story. I am German and I write just like that. Well, allow me to throw you a curveball. Here is an attempt to be a storyteller and this publication might just be the right one to tell this story.

My father was an ornithologist, and at a very young age I tagged along in the early morning hours, going to the woods, wetlands, lakes, and villages to map birds. As a young boy I learned to identify birds by song or sight instead of going to the dance of youth hangouts like my peers did. Did that make me a geek in the eyes of my classmates? It sure did. That interest in birds stayed with me when I moved to the U.S. in the mid-nineties. While I quickly learned to identify a Blue Jay or Red-tailed Hawk, I knew absolutely nothing else about North American birds. And at first birds were a little less on my mind as I tried to establish and develop a business and tried to make a living in a foreign country while soaking in the new culture that swept over me like a tidal wave. Purchasing our farm five years ago in upstate New York renewed my interest in birds. I soon thought of ways to attract them. Aside from enjoying them I am also fully aware of the benefit these birds have as insect control for livestock, especially when it comes to flies. I use no pesticides to control flies and they can be a bother to sheep in the summer if they appear in great numbers. So, there is a real benefit to attracting birds.

The most notable birds that have increased considerably since our arrival at our farm are the Eastern Bluebird, the Tree Swallow, the House Wren, the Savannah Sparrow, and the Bobolink. The three former birds have one thing in common: They nest in caves. Caves are easy to imitate by building birdhouses. In my search for suitable and reasonably priced lumber to build these birdhouses, I came across a local sawmill run by a Mennonite. I knew how much wood I needed and how wide and thick I wanted the boards to be, but I was uncertain as to what kind of wood it should be. I asked the mill owner which lumber would be most suitable for drilling screws and making holes without splitting the wood. He asked what I wanted it for. I didn't come right out with the answer since I thought he might think I am crazy for wanting to build birdhouses. After all, I was new in town and didn't want to build a reputation of being some sort of crazy person. I figured he would not understand, being Mennonite and thus living a very conservative lifestyle, and being interested in birds and wanting to build houses for them are mutually exclusive, so I thought at the time. Eventually I had to reveal what they were for. He suggested pine, mentioning that it is less likely to split



A tree swallow taking ownership of a newly mounted bird house

when putting screws close to the edges. In almost the next sentence he asked me to come into his house and look at his bird feeders through his living room window. Apparently, my interest in birds must have broken the ice. I was about to meet an extreme birder and his wife, who was just as interested in birds. From their living room I viewed lots and lots of bird feeders, with dozens of redpolls, gold finches, chickadees, and a great variety of other birds feeding at them. I had never seen anything like it.

Meanwhile, a pot in the kitchen was simmering on the stove with the lard in it to prepare more bird feed. Yes, these people cooked for birds! And I had been worried that

I could be considered the crazy one.... I know he and his wife will be reading this magazine. I hope they will forgive me that I felt compelled to tell this story.

In many regards this contact proved beneficial to me. He and his wife were able to help me identify birds I hadn't previously known, giving advice how to attract birds, and passing on knowledge about nesting behavior of other birds, so I was able to avoid disturbing or destroying their nest sites. In birding, it is helpful, if not necessary, to have a superior if you want to improve, especially when it comes to identifying birds by song.

Since that visit with the sawmiller, I build a dozen or two birdhouses every winter, using rough-cut pine and a design I pulled off the Internet. My birdhouses are plain and not at all fancy. They are a basic home and not a mansion, so to speak. But "my" birds haven't seen the well-finished birdhouses some others offer for sale around here at local stores and thus seem to be just as content nesting in my plain ones. By now I built a great number of these birdhouses of two different varieties, meaning with two differently sized openings. Bluebirds and Tree Swallows like an opening of one and a half inch while House Wrens benefit from an opening of one and an eighth of an inch which both bluebirds and swallows cannot access. Black-capped Chickadees benefit from an opening that is only 1 and 1/8 inches wide but I have attracted only one chickadee thus far. Ironically, this one is nesting in a bluebird house.

I have about a dozen or more bluebird pairs and about a dozen Tree Swallow pairs in my birdhouses, as well as many House Wrens. The farm is "strategically" plastered with about 70 to 80 birdhouses (I lost count of the exact figure). Two bluebird houses are usually grouped together. Since Tree Swallows are fiercely territorial, no second pair of Tree Swallows will nest in the second birdhouse, which then can be occupied by a bluebird. That often leads to a pair of bluebirds living side by side with a pair of Tree Swallows. To make the picture more complete I added a wren house to the mix and now have a

trinity of these birds in many places.

The openings face south or east and anywhere in between but usually not west or north. Most inhabited birdhouses are mounted on fence posts, utility posts, and trees that are either free standing or are right along the edge of the woods or a hedgerow. I had no luck with putting birdhouses a bit deeper into the woods. I did that in my desperate attempt to attract chickadees. Instead, I attracted mice and squirrels. In Germany I attracted two different kinds of chickadees with birdhouses deeper in the woods. That logic does not seem to apply here.

I open the birdhouses up in the fall and clean them out. They stay open all winter to eliminate the risk of deer mice inhabiting these birdhouses and thus making them unavailable to birds when spring comes. And did I mention the mess deer mice make in these birdhouses? By about mid-March I close the birdhouses back up. A hook ensures that the side does not open by itself and disturbs the nesting bird or puts the nest in danger. Closing the birdhouses at that time still bears some risk of mice occasionally occupying a birdhouse. However, it is the time when bluebirds search for a nest site.

My entire farm is put into pasture. That attracts another group of birds that nest on the ground. The most notable one is the Bobolink. When I started farming this place, half of the farm was hayfields and almost half of it hadn't been farmed for a few years and started to grow into bushes. The remainder was a pumpkin field. I had one pair of Bobolinks. The Bobolink was so rare in New Jersey where I farmed the previous eleven years that I was very excited to call a pair of Bobolinks my "own." I was concerned though that grazing this land, turning the hayfields into pasture and keeping them shorter than they had been, and the density of animal hoofs may not allow this pair of Bobolinks to successfully hatch young ones. Fast forward, just three years later I counted six pairs of Bobolinks. Hedged fledglings proved my concerns unfounded. In fact, it appears that the grazing has enhanced the number of ground nesting birds. Keep in mind, that I practice rotational grazing which allows each pasture cell to rest for about five weeks when these birds nest. I also always leave several inches of residue, which seems to provide the protection needed to avoid being detected by a crow or a fox. One of my bird books states that the Bobolink nests in May and usually only once. Incubation and raising the nestlings takes about four weeks altogether. Perhaps the five weeks of pasture rest is just the time needed to raise their young in the environment they seek without being disturbed. I also have avoided bush-hogging a spot where I thought a nest of any of the ground nesting birds might be when an excited adult flew up from the



The sight of a cardinal at a bird feeder with snow as the background never fails to please


ground and kept coming back to the same area. I have no idea if the purpose was ever met since no ground nesting bird flies directly up from its nest and instead always runs away first before it lifts off. So, let's leave it at least in my imagination that it did do some good.

The benefits of "birding" for my kids who grow up on this farm is priceless. It is entertaining as well as educational to observe the birds at the nest site or taking a peek into the birdhouse by opening the aforementioned swinging side of the bird house. It is easy to strike up a conversation if little birds or eggs are

inside the nest, discussing the different colors of egg shells, feathers, and nest material. It is equally entertaining and educational to try finding the nest of a Savannah Sparrow (which you may pass ten times before you find it) or the nests of a Killdeer or Horned Lark (which we haven't found *yet*). Of course, the biggest thrill is still being "attacked" by a Tree Swallow when standing next to its nest box. I know what birding did to me when I was at that age and what a lasting impression it made. I am hoping to pass on that interest in birds. Does that turn my kids into geeks too? Yes, it does. But we wrote in our daughter's yearbook: "Remember, it's cool to be a geek." Some friends of mine have one word about watching birds and that is "boring." Well, they'll never know what they are missing.

I am a deeply rational guy. I like running a business and I like factual and systematic approaches. I like orderly approaches, schedules, and systems. Perhaps you noticed from my previous articles. However, watching birds touches me on an emotional level. It makes my day and creates a wonderful feeling when the Bobolink flies singing above my head while putting up electric fencing, when the numerous robins in the nearest hedgerow become literally my alarm clock in early spring, when the Indigo Bunting sits on a stem of a goldenrod when I bushhog and makes me stop and turn off the tractor. I love when the sun brings out the beauty of the steel blue back of a Tree Swallow and the red of a Scarlet Tanager and the orange of a Baltimore Oriole. To have "control" over the birds

I seem to be able to attract to the farm by creating suitable habitats sits just fine with this German.

Did I succeed in telling a story? You, the reader, get to decide. But next time I will be all factual again. I promise. 

Ulf Kintzel is a native of Germany and lives in the U.S. since 1995. In 2006 he moved from New Jersey to Rushville in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm. He breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.



A bluebird perched on an electrical fence post singing its song