**PROFILE: Art Aylesworth 1927-1999**

***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 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 runoff 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 nest boxes for bluebirds, but it wasn’t until the spring of 1981 that 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 nest boxes, too, and Art had asked Duncan Macintosh, a bluebirder from Lethbridge, AB to meet him at dinner. Tom Matsko and Rod Spencer, Great Falls also attended the dinner and met Art for the first time that night and the nest 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 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 nest boxes. 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 nest boxes 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” 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 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 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 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 nest box 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.”