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The Bluebird Chronicles

A Catskills romance

Leslie T. Sharpe

For Thomas E. Musselman

A EUROPEAN STARLING ALIGHTS ON THE CEDARWOOD NESTING BOX. IT starts to peck at the small round entrance hole as if trying to widen it. “Get away,” I scream, rushing down the steps of my front deck and across the lawn to the meadow’s edge, waving my hands at the startled starling—a notorious bully and glutton of the bird world—who retreats swiftly and, I am sure, sullenly.

This is the bluebirds’ second nest of the season, sheltered in the box that is securely affixed to the sturdy pine post. The courting male, once he has chosen his domicile, attracts the female by fluttering his wings and flying into the box with nesting material. If his lady love approves—and bluebird females, as I have seen, can be very fussy—she will fly to him and enter the box, thus solidifying their bond. I watched in early spring, at my home in the Catskills foothills of upstate New York, as Mrs. Bluebird resolutely built her first nest with strands of grass. I would discover, when I checked to ensure



A bluebird nesting box, left, stands next to blooming goldenrods in the meadow near the writer's Catskills house.

LESLIE T. SHARPE

the box was free of wasps, bees, and other pests, that she had threaded the soft, pale grasses with pine needles, and added, as embellishments, several turkey feathers. The nest itself was neat, cup shaped, and several inches high, which would allow the nestlings, when it was time for them to fledge, easy access to the opening. The male, who cedes nest building to his mate, though diligently conducting daily inspections, sat nearby in the yellow cedar tree, serenading her with his soft, warbling *tu-a-wee* song while she worked. He was also her resolute guardian and assiduous chaperone, swooping down on any other bird that ventured near—another male bluebird, rival for her attentions, or even a wild turkey,¹ an imposing tom in full breeding regalia, his feathers iridescent in the sharp spring sunlight, strutting and fanning, oblivious of all save his own coy, modest females.

Yet as fierce as the male bluebird acted in defense of his nest, and therefore his own genetic imperative, he was unfailingly tender to his mate. He flew into the box, on those chilly early spring mornings, with a wriggling worm or some other tasty tidbit to feed her as she sat on the eggs, incubating them. If she left the nest box to hunt for herself or simply to sit in the yellow cedar tree (mothers of all species, it seems, need a break), he would enter the box and, I assumed, resume the vigil until she returned, to ensure that the eggs stayed warm. Poppa, as I soon called him, also proved to be a devoted father.

From dawn to dusk, the bluebirds worked together to feed their ravenous young, bringing them offerings of small invertebrates. (Painful to see: A pretty tiger swallowtail butterfly disappeared into the box.) They sat atop the flagpole in the front yard—an excellent vantage point from which the bluebirds can spy ants, slugs, and caterpillars lurking in the grass—then spiraled down to the ground and snatched their prey, carrying it daintily back to the nest box (though Momma had to battle to hold onto a cricket). Sometimes they would just sit there together, Momma and Poppa, and preen each other—behavior far more modest than the tree swallows' antics, the cheeky occupants of a nearby nest box, who mated acrobatically, and repeatedly, atop the flagpole.

In the twenty years I have lived on this mountain, I have experienced firsthand the changing climate and its harmful effects on birds, whose populations already suffer from habitat loss, pesticides, and the dangers of spring

¹ The wild turkey averages 43 to 45 inches in length, whereas the bluebird measures about 6 to 8 inches from bill to tail. (The meddling starling, chunkier in appearance than the bluebird, is about 8 inches.) Still, Poppa Bluebird was unintimidated and undeterred by tom turkey.



Drawn from Nature by J. J. Audubon. F.R.S. F.L.S.

Engraved, Printed & Coloured by E. Havell, London. 1825.

For Birds of America in 1827, Audubon depicted a mother bluebird feeding a worm to her baby and a male bluebird, above. "BLUE-BIRD" BY JOHN JAMES AUDUBON/PUBLIC DOMAIN

and fall migrations. Bluebirds, especially, as early and enthusiastic first nesters, are vulnerable to the increasingly erratic weather. A January warm spell—not just a thaw, but a week of temperatures approaching 70 degrees Fahrenheit—makes me hold my breath, hoping the bluebirds, ever eager, won’t arrive yet. If they do, their nest building quickly falls prey to the cold, inevitable and cruel, and the loss of food, as the insects they depend on disappear. I have opened the nest box and found the bluebird parents, who haven’t even finished their nest, dead from the elements. It is heartbreaking to see such vibrant, beautiful creatures so still. Conversely, several seasons ago, after a seemingly “normal” spring of gradually rising temperatures, the last snowstorm on the mountain came in mid-May. That year’s pair already had nestlings in the box, and there was no food for the little family. Every morning, I was outside at dawn, clearing snow, which kept drifting, and putting out mealworms, a favorite bluebird food. They took them gratefully—a relief to me, as bluebirds won’t always accept such gifts from humans—an indication of their desperation, no doubt. Momma Bluebird would fly to the deck rail, peering in at me through the living room window, as if to say thank you. I was thrilled when I saw five bluebird fledglings flying after their beleaguered parents, later that spring. But snow, at least, for the little ones in their box, is insulating. Perhaps most dangerous to bluebirds, and other early nesters such as tree swallows, is the fact that Catskill springs have become colder and wetter, lasting longer, with chilly, penetrating rains. The nest box, though not a perfect haven, offers a home for so many species, and a way that humans, providing this habitat, can make a real difference in the life, and survival, of all sorts of birds, from wrens to chickadees to owls and songbirds such as the bluebird.

THE CATSKILLS SPRING HAS ALWAYS BEEN UNPREDICTABLE AND UNRULY, WITH winter reluctant to leave—a warm, sunny day in April, even May, could be followed by an unexpected snowstorm. So I worried over that May’s killing “hard” frost, when the temperature dipped to 25 degrees Fahrenheit for three consecutive nights—and indeed, opening the box after I was sure all the nestlings had fledged in June, I found a single forlorn egg, left lifeless by the cold. Still, I was relieved not to discover a nestling, dead and desiccated, in the nest.

The previous April had been cold and rainy—even for the Catskills, though that pattern is becoming more common with climate change—and provided few insects for last year’s nesting pair to feed their young. I left out dried mealworms, fat and protein rich, but that time, the bluebirds, unused to the feeder, refused to come.

I tried putting out piles of dried mealworms on a bluestone boulder that was near the nest box. Still, the bluebirds ignored my offerings. The robins, gray squirrels, and blue jays gobbled the mealworms greedily. Every day I checked to see if the bluebirds were still feeding their brood. Then, one morning, the parents just disappeared. I hoped against hope, but when I saw a turkey vulture, harbinger of death, sitting atop the nest box, I gasped. Steeling myself against that acrid stench, unmistakable, I opened the box to find seven perfectly formed bluebird nestlings, their pinfeathers tinged with blue, all dead, probably from hypothermia and starvation. I live in nature, I understand that the cycle of life and death rules everything, that birds have several nests, and many offspring, because so many are lost. But I was devastated. I left the little ones in their nest at the edge of the woods, as food for some passing critter, hoping to give their lost lives meaning. . . .

But the current season's first nest was successful. I emptied the box of the nest—once they have fledged, the young will not return—and discarded it at some distance so as not to attract a feral cat or enterprising raccoon intent on clawing their way up the post. The bluebirds will happily build a second nest on top of their first, but that new nest, higher and thus closer to the entrance hole, makes it more vulnerable to predators. Then I sanitized the box, with a dilute solution of vinegar and water, to protect against parasites such as blowflies, which can weaken and even devour young. As I worked, enjoying the warmth of a sunny June day in the Catskills, the meadows already high, fragrant with the sweet, intoxicating scent of pink milkweed flowers, I hoped that the bluebird parents would return to the cedar wood nesting box, now cleared and cleaned to their careful specifications, to raise their second brood. Summer, even in the moody, changeable Catskills, a place of soft morning mists and sudden thunderstorms, is a kinder season.

JOHN BURROUGHS, FAMED CATSKILLS TRAMPER AND CELEBRANT OF THESE hills, naturalist and nature writer, was bedazzled by bluebirds. In his poem "The Bluebird,"² Burroughs celebrates the bluebird's "azure coat and ruddy vest" as "hues that April loveth best."

And thy blue wing's a joyous sight,
Among the brown and leafless trees.

² John Burroughs, "The Bluebird," first published in *Harper's Magazine*, June 1903.

“Azure,” the color of the summer sky, is the adjective Burroughs favors when describing the blue of the male eastern bluebird.³ (The female lacks the bright iridescence of her mate. She is grayish-buff above with light blue tinges in her tail and wings, and her breast is a subdued orange wash.) The winter sky is sharp, a cut-crystal sapphire. The spring sky is soft, washed, as pale as a robin’s egg. The high summer sky, with its dome of deep infinite blue, is the fulfillment of the bluebird’s promise when that first thrilling azure flash defies winter’s bleakness, a reprimand of its recalcitrance, which turns our hearts toward hope.

All of our clichés—the “bluebird of happiness,” the bluebird as symbol of good fortune and friendship, love, joy, and even fertility, which make it an enduring motif of American folk art (from pottery and painting to Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs) as well as a favorite subject of poetry and popular songs (the iconic “Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly”), and even a beloved, if corny, caricature of Disney cartoons (cheery bluebirds as Cinderella’s bridal couturiers and Snow White’s woodland escorts)—become new again in spring at the sight of the bluebird, one of our earliest returning migrants. In his essay “The Bluebird,” Burroughs wrote,

When nature made the bluebird she wished to propitiate both the sky and the earth, so she gave him the color of the one on his back and the other on his breast, and ordained that his appearance in spring should denote that the strife and war between the two elements was at an end.⁴

The bluebird’s plumage, summer sky blue, his belly as white as a cumulus cloud, his “ruddy vest” the color of rich Catskills clay—this small songbird, a passerine of the genus *Sialia* of the thrush family, personifies in his being nature itself.

THE STARLING APPEARS ONLY ONCE IN SHAKESPEARE.⁵ UNFORTUNATELY, THAT brief reference was not lost on Eugene Schieffelin. Schieffelin, a wealthy New Yorker and Shakespeare devotee, was determined to bring all the birds the

³ That is, “their [the bluebirds’] twinkling azure wings,” John Burroughs, “The Bluebird,” Chapter 7, *Wake-Robin*, first published by Hurd & Houghton, New York, 1871.

⁴ John Burroughs, “The Bluebird,” Chapter 7, *Wake-Robin*.

⁵ *Henry IV, Part 1*, 1.3.224: “Nay, I’ll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but Mortimer, and give it to him to keep his anger still in motion.”

bard mentioned to America. Of these,⁶ only European starlings, brash and bossy, survived, establishing themselves as resident aliens. Fifty years after 80 starlings were released in Central Park in 1880,⁷ they had colonized cities, suburbs, and even rural areas across North America. Their success was a cautionary tale, still being told with increasing urgency today. Invasive—that is, non-native—species, flora and fauna, often have no natural enemies in their new environs and, like the starlings, are highly adaptable and opportunistic. Native species, especially plants, are prone to being usurped by these invaders, which provide fewer quality food sources for pollinators, notably honeybees, and birds. Exotic invasive species, invariably introduced by human activity, pose a singular threat to our natural ecosystems—and farmlands.

In 1939, Rachel Carson praised the European starling for “his successful pioneering and his service in insect destruction.”⁸ Clearly, by then, the “pioneers” had not yet morphed into marauders, flying in flocks in the hundreds, to pillage crops and raid feed stores. But in the 1930s, noted ornithologist Frank Chapman warned that the starling already posed a serious threat to other cavity nesters, in particular, the eastern bluebird.⁹ The aggressive starlings readily roused the smaller bluebirds from their territory, which was beginning to be compromised by habitat loss due to development and the increasing use of pesticides. The starlings seized the bluebirds’ nesting sites—natural tree cavities and old woodpecker holes, even openings in wooden fence posts. Dr. Lawrence Zeleny, founder of the North American Bluebird Society, wrote in a 1977 article, “During the past 40 years, the population of the eastern bluebird may have plummeted by as much as 90 percent.” Extinction, Zeleny concluded, was “a real possibility.”¹⁰

⁶ Chaffinches, song thrushes, nightingales, and skylarks. Steven B. Garber, *The Urban Naturalist* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1987), 144.

⁷ Garber, *Urban Naturalist*, p. 144.

⁸ Rachel L. Carson, “How about Citizen Papers for the Starling?” *Nature Magazine* (June–July 1939): 317–319.

⁹ Jim McCormac, “Eastern Bluebirds Still Brighten Meadows, Thanks to Nest Boxes,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, “Nature,” February 19, 2016.

¹⁰ Lawrence Zeleny, “Song of Hope for the Bluebird,” *National Geographic Magazine*, June 1977. The response to Zeleny’s article (and his 1976 book, *The Bluebird: How You Can Help Its Fight for Survival*, published by Indiana University Press) was so overwhelming—the concerned public became galvanized in its support of the bluebird—that he founded the North American Bluebird Society the next year, in 1978, which began his decades-long campaign to save the eastern bluebird.

Dr. Thomas E. Musselman, a “gentle godfather to millions of bluebirds,” invented the bluebird box that “brought the bluebirds back.”¹¹ An accomplished naturalist, a member of the first class in ecology ever taught at the University of Illinois, Musselman observed as early as 1926 that bluebird populations were falling precipitously in Adams County, Illinois, because starlings—



Leslie T. Sharpe with one of the six nesting boxes she watches with a passion. COURTESY OF LESLIE T. SHARPE

and those other invasives, house sparrows—usurped nesting cavities. Nest boxes made of varying materials—wood, clay, even tree branches—had long been in use to attract insectivores, especially the bluebirds, prized for their beauty and sweet, melodic song, as well as their insect-catching skills. What Musselman did was tailor the box specifically to the bluebird “with attention to the entrance hole, ventilation, drainage, floor dimension, cavity depth, all relating to bluebird territorial imperatives.”¹² In 1934, Musselman erected his first “bluebird trail,” a series of 25 boxes set 100 yards or so apart and subject to regular monitoring and maintenance, to keep the nests clean, dry, and free of parasites and predators.

In the intervening years, Musselman’s original design has been modified and improved.¹³ But his basic principles of bluebird box—and especially bluebird trail—construction are still relevant. My own modest bluebird trail of six

¹¹ *Sialia* (*The Quarterly Journal of the North American Bluebird Society*), 1, no. 3 (Summer, 1979): 99.

¹² *Sialia*, p. 100.

¹³ Today’s two basic types of nest boxes are considered to be the standard or Duncan box, perfected by William Duncan, who distributed hundreds of these in Kentucky (*Sialis*, “Eastern Bluebird History,” sialis.org), and the Peterson box. Both have these critical features: “1. Properly sized and placed entrance hole; 2. Adequate ventilation; 3. Adequate drainage; 4. No pressure-treated lumber; 5. No dark-colored paints or stains; 6. A minimum front roof overhang of 5 inches; and 7. No external perch placed on the front of the box.” (*Ecology Technical Bulletin*, no. 1, “Nest Boxes for Cavity Nesting Birds,” can be found at <https://www.dot.ny.gov/divisions/engineering/environmental-analysis/repository/NestBox.pdf>.)

nest boxes stands along the edge of sunny meadows near an expanse of mown grass, which offers these insectivores ample food to feed their nestlings. Cedar wood, rot and insect resistant, which weathers to gray, providing a sort of natural camouflage, makes a durable nest box material. Each box features a slanted roof to shed rain and offer shade, an overhang to deter predators, a ventilation slot directly below the roof, and several small drainage holes, which I drilled in the floor of each, to rid the nest of excess moisture. Perhaps most crucial is the round entrance hole (with no perch, to deter house sparrows), which must be no more than 1½ inches in diameter, to prevent those pesky starlings from entering.

What Musselman, “the father of modern bluebird conservation techniques,”¹⁴ did was inspire a conservation movement, one of the most successful ever. Boy Scouts, backyard birders, Auduboners, and many dedicated “citizen scientists” banded together to save the eastern bluebird. In 1964, Ralph K. Bell, a poultry farmer in rural Pennsylvania, started a bluebird trail of about 200 boxes on utility poles along his egg delivery route. As many as 800 bluebirds fledged every year.¹⁵ In 1999, thanks to such grassroots efforts (which continue) the eastern bluebird was removed from New York State’s Endangered, Threatened and Special Concern List.¹⁶ The bluebird’s current conservation status—remarkable really, considering its recent history—is “Least Concern (population increasing).”¹⁷

Still, “bluebirders” remain vigilant, and have been known to snap the neck of house sparrows—another aggressive, non-native species, imported from England to New York City in the nineteenth century to control insects—that seize nesting boxes, often pecking bluebird nestlings, and their parents, to death. There *are* successful so-called passive ways of dealing with these invasive birds. One is simply not to put up boxes near dwellings inhabited by humans, which attract the aptly named house sparrows. Musselman observed, “I found little competition from English [house] sparrows, except where the boxes were placed close to a farmhouse or barn.”¹⁸ Another strategy is simply to remove the house sparrows’ nest, which may take several efforts, as male house sparrows are dogged and determined home builders. And of course,

¹⁴ *Sialia*, p. 99.

¹⁵ *Sialis*, “Eastern Bluebird History,” sialis.org.

¹⁶ New York State Press Release, May 11, 1999.

¹⁷ International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Red List, iucnredlist.org.

¹⁸ *Sialia*, p. 104.

increasingly, one can affix gizmos to a box that supposedly deter house sparrows while not discouraging bluebirds from nesting.

Aside from the ethics of favoring one species, such as the bluebird, native to North America, over a more common, introduced one—and the larger question of how much we should interfere in nature, even to right our own past interferences—the killing of the house sparrow, that cheerful, if homicidal denizen of city streets, appalled me. How I wondered, before I erected my own bluebird trail, before the bluebirds tenanted one of my own nesting boxes, could the bluebirds excite such passions?

THE SUMMER CATSKILLS ARE A PLACE OF COOL GRAYS—OF MORNING MISTS and evening clouds, and afternoon thunderstorms rolling across the mountains, and the ever-shifting wind bringing relief. But during that July's heat wave, even the wind blew hot, a mountain sirocco. Extreme heat, like extreme cold, can be lethal for birds, especially for new hatchlings who can't yet regulate their body temperature.

In the pitiless heat, I would find four eastern phoebe nestlings lying on the ground—one was already dead, the others, eyes closed, their bodies bloated, their tiny bills gaping for food. I guessed that their mother, whose nest beneath my back deck was unusually high (the phoebes, small grayish flycatchers with an incessant but endearing cry of *phee-bee, phee-bee*, nest there every year), had toppled it, on her flight in and out to feed her young. Then again red squirrels could have felled it or chipmunks, hunting for eggs, though both will take nestlings too.

If I had discovered the phoebes sooner, before the sun had blistered them, perhaps I could have replaced them in the remnants of their nest. But now, the only possible intervention—and kindness—was to kill them, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. "You can't let them suffer," said Jeremy, my friend and handyman, who every year carefully covers the corner of the deck that shelters the phoebe nest underneath when he power-washes it. He took the sorry little family gently from me. "It'll be quick," he reassured me. That night, lying in bed, I would think how sad it was that the phoebes had never known rain. . . .

Extreme heat can also be deadly for eggs, frying them in a wood nesting box, where it can be 10 degrees hotter than outside. As the temperature soared into the 90s and I saw Momma Bluebird sitting atop the flagpole, panting, I was stricken with fear for her and her babies-to-be. The tableau of the fallen little phoebes had affected me deeply. I hadn't been able to help them. Nor had I been able to save a young barn swallow its siblings had pushed out of

the nest onto a metal rafter right under the roof of my carport. Its parents had constructed a nest that was too small—a messy cup of mud, grass, and errant feathers. I had guarded the fallen nestling through much of that day, picking it up and moving it into the shade when it kept straying into the sunshine. Its parents were frantic, trying to feed their offspring, and I soon realized I was only agitating them more with “help.” I finally left the little “barney,” not yet old enough to fly, looking dazed, sitting on the inverted lid of a trash can, off the ground, safe, I hoped, from predators. In the morning, though, it was gone, and the parents were busy with their remaining brood.

Nature is not sentimental. Animals in the wild have one mandate, to propagate their species, which is why birds have so many young (the bluebird lays four to seven eggs). Many of them have more than one brood. The bluebird’s average life span in the wild is one to two years. Its many predators include the red-tailed hawk that the vigilante crows routinely roust from the stately shagbark hickory tree on my property. Bluebirds’ (and all birds’) spring and fall migrations are fraught with danger from storms, predators, and (for those who fly at night) the possibility of slamming into buildings. The bluebird, a shy bird without benefit of the tree swallow’s swooping speed or the aggressiveness of the starling and house sparrow, is at a decided disadvantage, especially against its avian competitors. Critters die, routinely, which is the reason for my own first naturalist’s rule, which I had now broken, yet again: never fall in love with wild animals, and never name them, as I had named the bluebirds, Momma and Poppa.

A quick web search revealed that to protect nesting bluebirds from heat, I should “attach a small umbrella to the box.” Having neither a small umbrella nor any possible way to attach it, I instead dug out a garish beach umbrella decorated with fluorescent Day-Glo flowers I had buried in my basement and erected it in the pristine meadow at an angle to deflect the high sun from the box. As I tried to secure it to the 4-by-4-inch pine post, Poppa, alarmed, fluttered about my head. He seemed unconvinced I was trying to help. Then I bumped into the box, chasing Momma from her nest. The two of them flew off, and I panicked that I might have driven them away.

To my relief, the parents soon returned and though wary, braved the umbrella, refusing to sacrifice their family to this meddling madwoman. But by the next morning, the hot mountain wind had blown the umbrella over—it was blocking the box’s entrance and Momma, frantic, was unable to get in. I quickly took down the umbrella as the parents eyed me from their perch in the cedar tree. The temperature was already in the 90s and although the box

faced east with its opening away from the afternoon sun, there was no shade at all. So I salvaged a wide-brimmed straw hat worthy of Monet at Giverny from my closet and fixed it to the top of the box, giving it the appearance of a stylish, if demure, scarecrow. Again I waited as the birds overcame their initial hesitation. Poppa landed on the hat as if to vanquish it, as I had seen him land on a chipping sparrow fledgling that had strayed too close to the box, driving the bewildered youngster away. I also decided to wet down the box several times a day, setting the hose nozzle to a fine mist which the bluebirds would fly through happily. Clearly, we were in this together.

The weather broke after a week, and soon I finally saw what I had been hoping for—Poppa, not just Momma, entering the box, both bearing insects, food for their hatchlings who had survived the relentless heat. But several days later, my elation was tempered by concern. Where was Poppa Bluebird? Only Momma was feeding their young, flying busily in and out of the box. I watched for him with increasing desperation that day and into the next. But Poppa never appeared, and I knew that he, the ever-faithful, vigilant father, must be dead. Then, still hoping, as I scanned the meadow for some sign of Poppa, the mourning doves and young eastern cottontails, still fairly guileless, silly rabbits indeed, which were lounging openly out on the lawn, suddenly scattered as a large bird passed overhead, casting a dark shadow that moved ominously over the grass. . . .

I heard it first—*kreee, kreee, kreee*—the caustic cry of a red-tailed hawk. Then I saw the hawk, its red tail visible even at a distance, flying high over the meadow, being chased by crows, sleek and shiny in the sun, who had recognized a predator more dangerous than they. Instinctively, without even a thought, I reached for my air rifle, very accurate, which I normally use for target practice, a very Zen activity, when nesting season is over, and loaded it. The rifle uses pellets, but it can kill birds and small game. I had never shot at any living thing, let alone something as majestic as a red-tail, but I would *not* let the bluebird nestlings be orphaned. I would *not* let Momma be taken too. Then I left the air rifle out on the front deck, leaning up against the house, and depended on the crows to alert me.

The next morning I awoke to a cacophony of cawing. From my living room window I spied a black cloud of crows circling a dying oak tree at the far edge of the meadow. Through binoculars, I saw a sight that made me gasp—*two* red-tailed hawks sitting on a bare branch, ignoring the raucous crows, who were intent on “mobbing” them, a behavior that birds use to drive predators out of their territory, especially in nesting season. Suddenly,

I felt a surge of rage—a rage spiked with protectiveness and even a desire for revenge. What had happened, I would wonder, to the naturalist who had so coolly chronicled the bluebirds' first nest of the season—from their arrival in early April to the day their last hatchling fledged in June—who understood more than most that nature is morally neutral, indifferent even, that it holds no grudges, or even any special likes, that it seeks only to survive?

I snatched my air rifle from where it stood sentry on the front porch, got into my old green Subaru, which was almost camouflaged in brown mountain mud, and, brakes off, rolled down the dirt road to the tree where the red-tails were still sitting, though the ever-cautious crows quickly dispersed at my approach. The irony of the rough-hewn wooden sign I had affixed to my front gate was not lost on me as I passed it. "Lazy Hawk Mountain," it read, in tribute to a young red-tail of several summers ago that seemed to prefer riding the thermals of a hot sunny day to honing its hunting skills. I admired birds of prey—such skillful flyers, those sublime assassins of the sky—and appreciated their place in nature. Could I really kill one species—one beautiful and necessary, if deadly species—to save another?

The hawks were high up in the tree, but this was a high-powered air rifle and I am a good shot. For a moment I just sat there breathing. Then I got out, closed the car door quietly. But before I could even raise the rifle to my shoulder—to my relief—the red-tails flapped off down the mountain. They had recognized the *real* predator, the human one, *me*. . . .

I NEVER SHOT AT THE RED-TAILED HAWKS, I DIDN'T HAVE TO. (WOULD I HAVE? Could I have? Doubtful. But still. . . .)

My fellow bluebirders were sympathetic when I told them my tale. "Without the bluebirds," one said, nodding in understanding, "there would be no spring." But another friend scolded me for "even considering shooting red-tails," her "totem animal," she called them, while dismissing the slaying of "nuisance" house sparrows as "necessary," leaving me to contemplate how relative the value is we place on life—human as well as avian.

The crows, who gleefully steal eggs and hatchlings—I once saw a crow flying with a nest in its bill being pursued by irate red-winged blackbirds—kept the hawks at bay. I knew that the bluebirds, once they fledged, until they were adults, would be vulnerable to the crows as well as the red-tails. But in protecting their own territory, the crows, for now at least, in nature's irony and symmetry, were protecting the bluebirds too. Still, I monitored the nesting box anxiously, with the name and telephone number of a local

songbird rehabilitator (trained to foster baby birds even this young) at the ready. I still feared for Momma Bluebird. Even if she escaped the hawks, I knew how difficult it was for a single bluebird parent to successfully fledge a brood of hatchlings on her—or his—own. And I was also concerned that any weaker nestlings might be neglected or even abandoned by Momma, who had worked so tirelessly without her mate.

Then, one morning, nearly three weeks later, a grayish bluebird fledgling, with dark spots on its back and breast, so drab compared with its brilliant parents—especially, of course, Poppa—landed clumsily on my deck rail. I watched, enthralled, as Momma cajoled its siblings into leaving the nesting box—flying to the box, peeking in, flying away again, encouraging them to follow her. She wasn't feeding them, I also noticed—a powerful incentive for a hungry young bird to brave that first flight. Then the remaining nestlings started to zoom out, one by one, as if they were on a runway. To my delight, the new fledglings *all* landed on the railing of the deck, where they sat, wobbly, looking around, stunned and somewhat disheveled, until their mother joined them. If it's possible for a bird to look pale and worn, she sure did.

When Momma arrived, she cocked her head at her fuzzy little fledglings as if counting them—I, 2, 3, 4. Then, satisfied they were all there, she flew off, leading her bright new bluebirds into the nearby woods, where she would feed them until they were old enough, and strong enough, to fend for themselves. Poppa would have been proud.

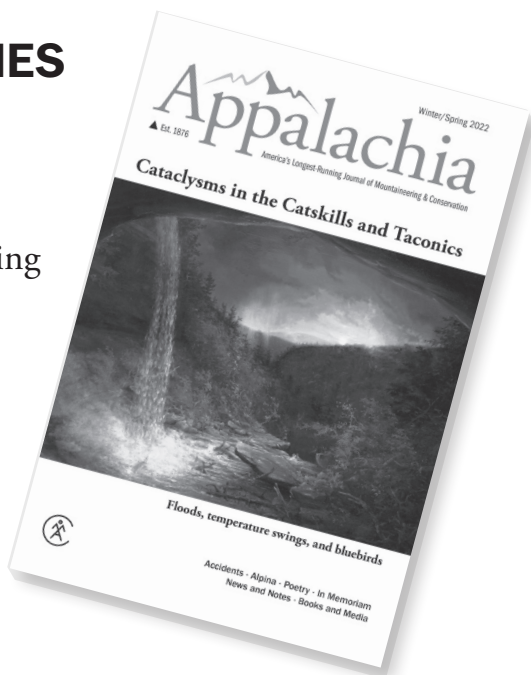
LESLIE T. SHARPE is the author of *The Quarry Fox: And Other Critters of the Wild Catskills* (Abrams, 2017), a narrative study of her home landscape, the Great Western Catskills, and the many critters that inhabit it. The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development named Leslie as one of Fifty Stewards of the Catskills in 2019. The audiobook of *The Quarry Fox*, narrated by the author, was released by Silver Hollow Audiobooks in 2020. She has taught writing and editing at Columbia University, New York University, and the City College of New York. She is a former vice president of the New York City Audubon Society.

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