

WILDLIFE KINGDOM AWAKENS WITH THE COMING OF SPRING

April 1, 2003

It's March 21 as I write this and I am seeing many signs of spring regarding our wildlife community. The blackbirds and grackles are back, but I have yet to see my first robin in the neighborhood. Mourning doves are back and so are starlings.

The winter residents have been abandoning the sunflower and thistle seed in favor of natural forage that is becoming more plentiful as the snow recedes. It proves that the birds prefer natural food when it is available. I am still feeding whole and cracked corn which the turkeys and new arrivals eagerly seek.

I have not seen any signs of lovelorn mink working their way up and down the riverbanks. I am sure they have been active when I'm not paying attention.

The river opened three days ago and merganser ducks, both American and hooded, will be returning soon. They pretty much fend for themselves as far as their food needs are concerned. The black and mallard ducks that soon make no qualms about accepting my handouts.

We are rewarded for our efforts watching the antics of the parents of all duck species shepherding their young. From our vantagepoint above the river we are able to watch the mergansers bucking their way against the current in pursuit of minnows and crayfish. The lucky fisherman has to fight to keep its prize when it surfaces.

I have placed two large wooden nest boxes in the trees across from the house, which never fail to have occupants. Originally they were meant to be woodduck nest boxes, but I never have been successful in getting them for tenants. After modifying the openings to accommodate the much larger common merganser, we have not failed in finding tenants.

I wish all of my nesting sites were as successful. Fifteen years ago I had some 25 bluebird nest boxes that were totally occupied by tree swallows. They have steadily declined in number down to where five or six boxes suffice. Of those, I have yet to see a successful rearing of young. I can only surmise that the lack of black flies in recent years is the reason. Boxes placed on the shores of Woodhull Lake show a better success rate.

In the past I had some success with an occasional bluebird occupant. The more aggressive tree swallows appeared to crowd them out. Now that their numbers are limited I will look with interest to see if the bluebirds have more success.

There are many ways we can enhance habitat and conditions to encourage various bird species: feeding is not necessarily the only way. For several years we had a pair of killdeer nesting in the open field that was used in the early '60's as the construction site for the new road between McKeever and Thendara. An area of stone that approximated the size and color of killdeer's eggs appealed to them. I was sorry to see that they failed to nest there last spring.

It was great fun to take the grandchildren there and see if they could find the eggs lying in plain sight among the stones that they so ingeniously

resembled. The children and family dogs were intrigued with the adult birds' feigned broken wing act leading them away from the eggs or chicks.

Few wildlife parents will actually defend their young by bodily attacking intruders. I have had the occasional mother grouse do so in a most determined way. Another that really had me concerned was an irate goshawk. She drove me from the vicinity in no uncertain terms.

As a general rule, most hunters, fishermen and trappers are true sportsmen and care about and are most solicitous of the propagation and protection of all wildlife. Show me true sportsmen and I'll show you persons who place the well being and rights of the animal above their own. Furthermore, the older they become the more of a soft touch they become.