The View From Heifer Hill—March 2017

Winter Bluebirds

Bob Winston, our former director at the Bonnyvale Environmental Education Center, was (and still is) a man of great tolerance. There were only two things that perturbed him during his tenure at BEEC—toilet paper placed on the dispenser "the wrong way" and cluster flies. The rest of us on the education/janitorial staff eventually got the toilet paper thing figured out. As any inhabitant of a drafty Vermont farm building knows, however, cluster flies arise in endless supply from building interstices through some spontaneous process. Bob could not pass the windows without sliding them open and closed vigorously several times to evict a few of the hovering horde. The released flies would buzz off sluggishly into the wintry chill, or simply drop to the snow on the roof below. I felt sorry for the flies—until a flock of bluebirds discovered Bob's bonanza. Soon bluebirds perched on the vent pipe outside Bob's window waiting for a release of flies.

After Bob's retirement, the remaining BEEC staff ignored the flies until the winter afternoon the next year when a bluebird landed on the vent pipe looking expectant. Sorry cluster flies. That was a number of years ago, but each year at least one winter bluebird remembers the wonder of cluster flies and waits near the windows, and thus we train subsequent generations.

Unless you live near open fields, the bluebirds' preferred habitat, you might be surprised to learn that there are any bluebirds in Vermont in the winter. Most of them do head to the southern and central states for the frosty months. These wintering birds are outliers. Those that survive have first dibs on a breeding territory. For bluebirds, who must compete with swallows, wrens, starlings, and house sparrows, as well as other bluebirds for nest cavities, this confers an important advantage. With the warming climate, more of these hardy gamblers must be succeeding, for bluebirds have been showing up more often in the northeast during Project FeederWatch counts over the past twenty-five years (learn more at feederwatch.org).

It wasn't a birdfeeder that drew the winter bluebirds to BEEC, and it wasn't cluster flies either; it was the bright red spires of sumac berries. Staghorn sumac is a fast-growing native shrub, and one that is often treated as a weed by human landscapers. I love its unusual antler-like growth form and the foliage that turns a dazzling red in the fall. More importantly, it is the caterpillar food source for some of our butterflies, it is of exceptional value to native bees, and, oh the birds it attracts in the late winter!

If you would like to turn a plague of cluster flies into a bluebird feeder, here is my advice: cultivate the native plants that produce winter fruit. Sumac fruits are high in vitamins, but other native shrubs produce winter berries that are high in fat as well. Southern arrowwood (*Viburnum dentatum*), gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*), northern spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), and Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) are among the best.

Nest boxes will also greatly boost your chance of attracting bluebirds, and there are many online sources of information on how to build and install them to attract bluebirds and to keep the birds safe from predators. Bluebirds will also spend winter nights in these boxes, often in the company of other bluebirds, and such shelters likely increase their survival rates. Even if you do not live in bluebird habitat, these same recommendations will be sure to make winter easier for many other birds, and more entertaining for you. Who knows, maybe other species can learn to stalk cluster flies. Chickadees? Nuthatches? Why not! I hope you'll let me know if you find out.