



An Affiliate of NABS

Mission: To increase the population of bluebirds and other native cavity-nesting birds through the promotion of bluebird awareness among concerned citizens.



Bluebirds
Across Nebraska

www.bbne.org

The BANner

Volume 25, No. 3 | August 2018

Your information is important!

YOUR REPORT FORM

is due by Oct. 15

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New website makes reporting easier than ever

BAN recently released a new website with the goal to increase traffic and interest. The new layout allows us to organize our many resources in a way that makes them easier to find and share. In addition, we have found that bluebirders from all over the country have been ordering nesting boxes through our online store, which needed an upgrade. If you haven't already, take a minute to check out the new site at the same address: bbne.org.

In addition to the new website, BAN is making it easier than ever to report your nesting statistics. It's just a simple click to access the online reporting form, which is more comprehensive for our records and easier for you to complete. This saves postage as well.

Remember, before putting your records away be sure to complete the reporting form either online or using the card included with this newsletter. It's so important to help us understand what has happened this year with our precious bluebirds. As President Sandy Seibert writes, "The continued population growth is up to us as members of BAN. Let's keep up the good work so that our grandchildren and their grandchildren will be able to enjoy this beautiful bird as much as we do."

— Jeanne Johnson,
social media chair



Three ways to contribute your numbers



Complete your report form, then affix a first-class stamp and mail it to BAN.



Scan and email your completed report form to info@bbne.org.



Visit bbne.org and click on "Report 2018 Bluebird Nesting Statistics Online Now," then enter your information.

Bluebirds Across Nebraska (BAN) Report Form
Your report is important to the organization. Please mail by Oct. 15.
If you choose, report your numbers at www.bbne.org.

Name _____ Date _____
Address _____
City _____ email _____
State _____ Zip _____
In what county and state are your boxes located? _____
If your trail is located in a state park, which one? _____
How many nest boxes do you monitor? _____
How many eggs were laid? _____
How many bluebird young left the nest (fledged)? _____
Did a child help you monitor your trail at any time? Yes ☐ No ☐
Comments _____

Thank you for your quick response.

Bluebirds, bullies and barn razing

When bluebird babies are under attack

By Sharon Friede, Greenville, PA

It was a beautiful summer day as I was driving toward one of my favorite BAN slot nest boxes. What was this I was seeing? Both bluebird parents were atop the box, flapping their wings wildly and vocalizing loudly. That's not normal, I thought. I stopped the truck and approached the box only to see a house sparrow fly out of it. Oh no! I was dreading opening the box because I knew that inside were five young that were just about a week away from fledging. I carefully opened the box and saw four of the young hunkered down tight to the floor. The fifth nestling was atop the others and was bare to the skin, except for its flight feathers. I noticed the little guy had a small spot of blood on his head, too. I nudged him and he seemed to be otherwise OK. The four babies on the floor also seemed OK. But, what to do now? I knew I had to do something. This was a true emergency!

No sooner did I move away from the box and in went the bully house sparrow again. My knee-jerk reaction was to run toward the box yelling, "House Sparrow!" When I did, it flew out. I rechecked the young ... still OK. Then I stayed close but gave the parents enough space to return to the box. This house sparrow was relentless. I continued to go after the sparrow and both bluebird parents chased it off each time I intervened. I soon realized that I needed a plan of action.

I feared I'd have to take the young out of the box and, if I might be unable to return them, I needed a wildlife rehabilitation rescuer. I called the local rehab facility — on speed dial — and described the situation to the songbird specialist. She asked whether the parents were going inside the box or just alighting upon the entrance. I told her they

were doing both. Her tone changed to a worried one when she said, "The sparrow will kill the parent bird if it goes inside the box." I felt a smidgen of hope when I was able to assure her that parent bluebirds could escape because the opening was a slot. She sounded relieved and told me she could take the young if need be. That was great, but first I had to try to get that sparrow.

The woman who lived at the box location was distressed to realize that the nestlings she called "blueberries" were being so savagely threatened. I thought I'd ask her to continue chasing the sparrow while I went up the road to get the supplies I needed to temporarily close the box opening. If I had not had help, I would have removed the trip bar from a Van Ert trap — I always have one in the vehicle — and mounted it backward inside the box to cover the entrance. Mounting the trap backward would stop the closure lip from pushing into the box and keep birds out. I planned on partially blocking the slot opening with a carpentry shim. I would leave an opening only large enough for the parents to still see the young inside, but that would prevent the sparrow from entering. Near the bluebird box, I would erect a trap box. The trap box would slip onto a conduit pole that I could easily and quickly pound into the ground. The trap had a round entrance hole large enough for

the sparrow to get in, but too small for bluebirds to enter — 1 1/4 inch. I was confident that, using a Van Ert trap, this plan would enable me to nab the sparrow. Now that I had a plan that should work, I was ready to go get supplies. Meanwhile, both adult bluebirds continued to defend their box.

Suddenly, I realized that the parents were calming down. Then they started feeding the nestlings. I was not seeing the house sparrow anymore. I thought maybe they chased it away. From a distance, I watched the box for another hour or so as daylight faded, but I saw no sign of the sparrow. I wondered why this once peaceful and productive nest box would have become the target of an aggressive sparrow. I thought it was because of a change in the environment. An old barn on the property was in the process of being torn down. I suspected that the house sparrow had been nesting in the barn and had consequently lost his spot to nest. Some bluebirders have reported incidents of house sparrow "retaliation." In this case, I thought the loss of the sparrow's nest likely prompted him to try stealing the bluebird's box. But I had been ready to help. I knew that having an emergency plan and supplies at the ready was a good idea for any bluebird landlord, whether they have one nest box or a hundred.

The next day, the woman who lived at the box location found a deceased house sparrow while mowing the grass. I believed that the bluebird parents had eliminated the threat to their young. I doubted that this would have been possible if the box had not had a slot entrance. But after that attack, the female bluebird continued to feed the nestlings for about a week. All the young fledged. I didn't see the male bluebird very much after the attack. I hoped he was OK.

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No bluebirds fledged?

You established your trail with enthusiasm and expectations of seeing those beautiful bluebirds, but alas, you have not fledged any.

If you have a newly established trail and have not had any nesting attempts by a bluebird, don't give up! A person can do everything by the book and still not be fortunate enough to get bluebirds. In some cases, it may take years to get bluebirds; however, with the large increase in the bluebird population in Nebraska and western Iowa, the odds are in your favor that you will be successful.

Or, if you have a trail where bluebirds have attempted to nest but none have fledged, once again, we repeat: don't give up!

But, please read the following suggestions and make sure you are following these basic recommendations for a successful bluebird trail.

Location

Habitat is the most important factor in attracting bluebirds. The best box made, if placed in undesirable habitat, will not attract bluebirds. Pasture land is ideal. Since bluebirds feed on insects on the ground, they prefer areas where the grass is shorter or mowed occasionally. Fence lines provide ideal feeding perches so placing your box close to a fence is very effective. However, boxes mounted directly on a fence post are much too accessible to predators like raccoons. Bluebirds also like open areas, so avoid wooded or brushy areas. A few scattered trees or bushes nearby would make the location ideal. If your property is not suitable for attracting bluebirds, you may want to relocate your trail. You may find that a neighbor has a "desirable" spot that's convenient enough for you to monitor.



Check your boxes

By monitoring your boxes weekly, you'll know what is going on along your trail. A good box in a good location will not attract bluebirds if it is filled with mouse or sparrow nests, wasps, ants or sticks. Checking your boxes weekly will increase your chances of attracting bluebirds.



Mounting

If you are losing bluebirds to predators such as raccoons, snakes or cats, mount your boxes in a way that will prevent those predators from reaching your boxes. A smooth round pipe works well. For additional protection against predators, the poles can be greased or waxed.



Relocate your box

Sometimes, moving the box as little as 20 to 30 feet will make a difference.

If your bluebird box has not had bluebirds for three years, move your box.

The bluebird box you are using

There are three styles of bluebird boxes built and recommended by BAN: the Gilbertson PVC, Gilwood and Troyer. All of these boxes will provide a safe environment for bluebirds to raise their young.



Bluebirds, bullies and barn razing

When bluebird babies are under attack

Continued from Page 2

In the past, before I used slot boxes, the only deceased birds I found were blues in or near round entrance hole boxes. Now I am finding deceased house sparrows in and near slot boxes. I am convinced that the BAN slot box's wide entrance saved an adult bluebird's life the day of the

barn razing and my being in the right place at the right time saved the young. As the years go by, it is more and more clear to me that bluebirds, being encouraged by the ability to escape via a slot entrance, are becoming stronger protectors of their young and will fight to the death for their offspring.

Hopefully it is the attacker who loses the fight, the bluebird family is left intact and the fledglings grow to become defenders of their own young. It is a joy to be able to give bluebirds every advantage that I am able to offer, especially a nest box with a slot-style entrance.

WANTED

A FEW GOOD VOLUNTEERS

Someone once suggested that bluebirders must “think inside the box.” While this is certainly true, are you someone who also thinks outside of the box? If so, Bluebirds Across Nebraska needs you!

Much like the birds that thrive thanks to your efforts along the bluebird trail, BAN also requires guiding hands to ensure that we flourish in our mission to increase the population of bluebirds and other cavity-nesters through the promotion of awareness among concerned citizens. Volunteers are the lifeblood of this organization, and your talents are needed beyond the bluebird trail.

In addition to volunteers for events and workshops, we also seek people who are interested in serving as officers or committee chairs. Your creative thoughts and ideas are important to us, and we would like you to help guide this organization into the future.

If you would like to become more involved, contact Steve Eno at 402-783-3011 or Sandy Seibert at 402-334-8691.



Unique predator guard?

Stan Skikus of Union, Nebraska, took this photo while driving by one of his nest boxes in Cass County. “No snake problems here!” he reported.



Garage sale educates about bluebirds

Chance and Kai Snyder, grandsons of BAN members Rex and Jodi Adams of Blue Springs, have been working with their grandfather on bluebird projects in the Blue Springs area. They have helped build bluebird boxes and enjoy the bluebirds they see along the Standing Bear Bike Trail near their grandparents' home. The boys were excited to help spread the word about bluebirds at a family garage sale in Milford this summer, distributing educational information and even selling a membership and two boxes. Thank you, Chance & Kai!

Welcome | new members

Nebraska: Carol Hughes, Blue Springs; John & Helen Jeanneret, Johnson; Dana Johnson, Pierce; Carson & Hannah Kring, Raymond; Jay Pashalek, Firth; Sheila Shramek, Burr; Lynne Wilcke, Ponca; Lowell & Janet Wilhite, Omaha; David Wulfing,

Verdigre; **Illinois:** Sue Gibson, Batavia; Cynthia Griffin, Lake Carroll; Riley & Brady Griffin, Yorkville; Becky Janopoulos, Lanark; Sue Theisen, Bloomington; **Kansas:** Rita Buurman, Sabetha; Sharon Grimm, Sabetha

Need advice? | Have questions?

Where should I put my nest box? What kind of bird built this nest? Do I need to monitor my box? Having a problem with sparrows, wrens or raccoons? CALL YOUR COORDINATOR – THEY CAN HELP! Find your county's coordinator at [bbne.org](#) under the “Resources” tab.

Find us on facebook

Bluebirds Across Nebraska has a Facebook page where we'd love to have you share your comments, questions and photos! “Like” us at [facebook.com/bluebirdsacrossnebraska](#).

Kenneth Barnhill was dedicated to bluebirds

BAN members mourn the loss of Kenneth Barnhill of Barneston, who passed away May 11 at 82.

Ken was a longtime Gage County coordinator and was honored as BAN's 2014 Bluebirder of the Year. He had been instrumental in promoting bluebirds since 1996 in various Nebraska and Kansas counties.

Although he had been a farmer for most of his life, it wasn't until Ken saw "a whirl of blue feathers" fly out of the chimney pipe on the back room of his farmhouse that he learned about bluebirds. He soon began building bluebird boxes from old wooden siding, then became involved with BAN.

He and his wife, JoAnn, were regular attendees at various BAN workshops, conferences and other events. Ken, who monitored about 30 nest

boxes, said the key to being a good bluebirder wasn't the number of nest boxes monitored, but how well one monitored his or her nest boxes.

Ken became county coordinator in 2001 and hosted numerous workshops in Wymore, Adams and Beatrice, including one at the National Homestead Monument. His efforts extended well beyond Gage County, as he helped put on the first workshop in Marysville, Kansas, and reached out to western Nebraska, where his son, Father Robert Barnhill, served parishes in Arapahoe and Cambridge. He also coordinated nest box production/distribution

workshops for 4-H participants and helped establish trails for neighbors and on golf courses. His many efforts on behalf of bluebirds led him to be featured in two articles for Beatrice Daily Sun.

A video tribute to Ken can be viewed at ghchapel.com.

When our organization loses an active and dedicated member (and county coordinator), it is often hard to fill those shoes. But BAN is fortunate that Ken and JoAnn's son, David Barnhill of Barneston, has enthusiastically volunteered to serve as the new county coordinator for Gage County. Thank you, David.



Family shares Leo Wenzl's bluebird legacy

By Jim Wenzl

I built my first bluebird house when I was in junior high as a shop project. At the time, I did not have any idea how excited Dad would be when I brought it home. Before Dad joined BAN, or became the coordinator for Johnson and Pawnee counties, he mounted it on the telephone pole where he could closely monitor it from his recliner in the living room.

When Dad passed away this past March, I was thinking of a way to do something in his memory. I figured since I made his first bluebird house, I would make a few more in his memory. After telling a good friend, Louie Keim, about my ideas for the birdhouses, he helped me. He is a shop teacher at Thayer Central in Hebron, Nebraska.

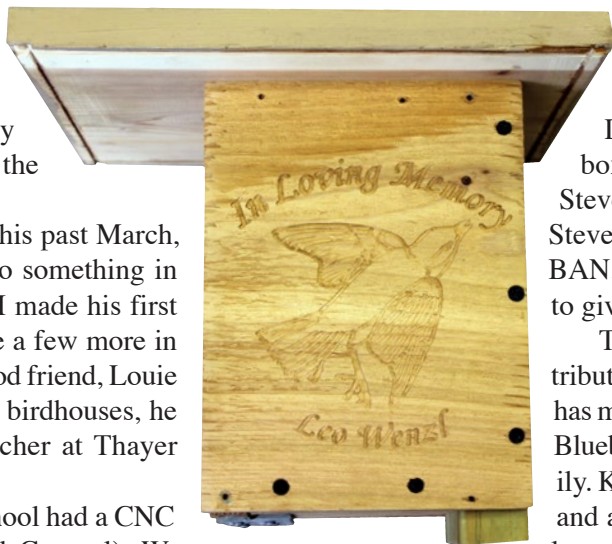
Louie advised that the school had a CNC router (Computer Numerical Control). We would be able to carve almost any computer-generated design into the cedar boards. Working together, we came up with the design pictured. Around the same time, I attended the BAN Spring Conference in Beatrice. Afterward, I entrusted in Steve Eno for guidance as I told him what I was planning to do. He also wanted to help. Steve told me that he would

like to donate the supplies needed to complete the project. A few weeks later, he gave me enough supplies for 30 boxes.

After I received the donation of lumber, Louie took some of it back to Thayer Central and had the junior high class help.

They engraved and assembled a few of them. He also gave me some that I put together as well. Last week, my sister and brother-in-law, Karla and Kevin Daehling, helped assemble the remaining boxes for the Missouri State Conference. Steve and Dan Blessing got the first boxes. Steve and Dan, along with countless others in BAN, meant a lot to our dad. It was a privilege to give them each a box in his memory.

Thank you to everyone involved who contributed to this. I cannot put into words what it has meant to see so many people come together. Bluebirds will forever be part of the Wenzl family. Karla and I have become lifetime members and are looking forward to carrying on Dad's legacy. We have a memorial bluebird box in the cemetery. It is located where the headstone will eventually go. Currently, three baby birds are in it — we had five babies hatch earlier this year — and are hoping it will become permanent, even after the headstone is placed. I'm certain Dad is looking down and smiling on the bluebird legacy he left behind.



The Great Wren Debate, revisited — Part 2

By Barbara Boyle

Miss Sherman pulled down her wren houses. The wrens then destroyed the families of downy and hairy woodpeckers, flickers, bluebirds and others, securing the cavities for themselves and teaching Miss Sherman firsthand of their propensity for retaliation. She fought for the rest of her life to reduce the numbers of House Wrens breeding on her property. And she made it her mission to educate and inform others about the character of the House Wren and the folly of erecting wren houses. She maintained that the countless boxes, assembled in nearly every school in the nation, given away at fairs and church socials, nailed up or hanging in almost every garden, farm and city, were providing an irreversible advantage to a species which, out of balance, lives at the expense of all other species in the area. A pair of House Wrens in an acre may result in little or no distress to their own or other species. Five to 10 pairs in that same area, however, can result in a profound alteration in the scheme of things, only to benefit an already hardy species that needs no such help.

“When Miss Althea Sherman’s paper on the House Wren was read before the Iowa Ornithological Union, at Ames in 1924, it aroused such an incredulous protest that only her undisputed reputation as an accurate and seasoned bird student enabled her observations to receive the consideration that was their due.” This quote, from Bird-Lore May/June 1925, gives just a hint of the controversy which erupted when the same paper was published in that journal. In an attempt to educate, Miss Sherman, probably inadvertently, launched the “Great Wren Debate,” which played out on the pages of scientific, ornithological and the popular press for years to come.

“The Problem of the House Wren” elicited heated responses and testimony from ordinary citizens through leading ornithologists. Articles had been published 20 years earlier regarding the destructive temperament of the House Wren and these were recalled. Readers were admonished to consider these findings and to heed the warnings that learned men of science had offered two decades earlier.

Indeed, Miss Sherman held herself accountable for not attending to these



warnings when putting up the wren boxes on her own property. Scores of observations and experiences with wrens were submitted and began to spill across the pages of Bird-Lore.

Some of the response was supportive of the House Wren and disclaimed any destructive behavior. Some more clearly substantiated Miss Sherman’s position and went even further, with research results including bill hole measurements and banding, which proved that

To read the first half of this story, see the June edition of The BANNER under the “Resources” tab at bbne.org.

female wrens also destroyed other species’ eggs. Another article by Miss Sherman, entitled “Down With the House Wren Boxes” appeared in The Wilson Bulletin several months later and further fanned the flames, spreading the debate to other publications.

In preparation for her case, Miss Sherman had searched through 552 scientific and ornithological publications. In the last pages of her wren journal she included a bibliography containing 114 articles, and not including her own vast research or the letters she received in response to her articles. Judging from letters which were published and from notations in her journals, the majority of written responses substantiated her findings and lauded her courage for exposing the truth and challenging the “sweet” reputation of “little Jenny Wren.”

The greater controversy, however, was an emotional one. Those who were entirely ignorant of the destructive tendencies of House Wrens, or worse, those who admired the wren and would not allow their beliefs to be challenged, attacked Miss Sherman. Her ornithological skills and observation techniques were challenged and criticized. She was ridiculed by some, lambasted on an emotional level and, profoundly worse, she was discounted by others. Where she was invited to speak before scientific societies, her research on other species was still valued, but her research on the House Wren (which was equally comprehensive and thorough) was ignored or avoided.

Miss Sherman was a woman in a field solidly dominated by men. She was self-taught and was dedicated, diligent and proud. By this time in her life Miss Sherman had long ago achieved national and international acclaim and recognition as a respected scientist and, possibly more important, there was self-recognition for her decades of research and accomplishments. The emotional reaction by the public, and even by some of her peers, to an issue which she felt profoundly threatened the welfare of so many other species of songbirds stirred feelings of great sorrow and bitterness within her. In journal entries and letters to Margaret Morse-Nice, it is clear that she took these attacks personally, and resented them. But more importantly, she felt the ignorance and refusal to listen further doomed her efforts to protect other birds.

Continued on Page 7

Have you had a change of address?

If you have moved, changed from a box number to a street address, or have your mail forwarded for several months, please let us know. Under bulk mailing restrictions, the Postal Service does not forward newsletters, but returns them to BAN with postage due. If the return notice has a new address, BAN then sends your newsletter to the correct address with the additional required postage. Please contact Membership Chair Sandy Seibert, 2115 South 114th Street, Omaha, NE 68144 or email us at info@bbne.org if this applies to you. Your help in keeping our costs down is greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Is it time to renew?

Take a moment to check the date above your name and address on Page 8. If your membership has expired, please renew today. Your continued support is appreciated.

BAN membership | Renewal form

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

County _____ Phone _____

Email _____

☐ Please check if you have had a change of address or phone.

☐ 1 year \$10

☐ 3 years \$20

☐ Business/Corporation - 1 year \$50

☐ Lifetime \$100

☐ Additional tax-deductible donation \$ _____

We are a 501 (c) (3) organization

Please mail this membership form and your tax-deductible contribution to:
Membership, BAN, P.O. Box 67157, Lincoln, NE 68506-7157

The Great Wren Debate, revisited — Part 2

Continued from Page 6

*“Speaking for myself, it must be confessed that I may have sinned against my small bird neighbors when, for purposes of study, there has been tolerance of two nestings each of screech owls and sparrow hawks [kestrels]. But there is only one sin that causes constant mourning in sackcloth and ashes, that causes me to lie awake nights visioning the future condition of our country with its bird population consisting mainly of those undesirable aliens, the starling, the English [house] sparrow, together with the Grackles and the House Wrens: that sin was the putting up of bird houses and allowing them to be occupied by House Wrens.” **

— Althea R. Sherman

Afterword

The time frame of the above article was 1925 or before. The dire warnings of Althea Sherman and others are more significant now, some 70 years later. The House Wren is everywhere: in open habitat where it was not previously found, and is still breeding in staggering numbers (five to 12 eggs per brood, usually two and occasionally three broods per season). Wren

boxes are everywhere, still the favored grade school project nationwide, and available at reasonable prices in stores everywhere. The House Wrens fill most of the houses provided for them, and many, many more, displacing bluebirds, tree swallows, chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers and more. The years between Miss Sherman’s observations and now have provided more opportunities to prove her theories and it is so. There is hardly a bluebirder anywhere who would not rail against the wren and tell stories of mayhem and sorrow. Any serious birder or “jister” — one who seeks to locate and identify species — will confirm their countless numbers in all regions.

And the reluctance to believe the destructive behavior of House Wrens is as prevalent today as in Miss Sherman’s time. Jenny Wren? No!

There have been decades to study or even chance upon the materials available in regard to this species. Yet there is widespread ignorance. Is there unwillingness to look at the truth? To explore and share observations right here in our own backyards?

It is time to once again open up the

“Great Wren Debate.” It is this writer’s opinion that House Wrens not be allowed to nest in boxes; not be so overwhelmingly helped by humans; that the popularization of wren boxes in schools and elsewhere be stopped and that robin platforms be built instead. Maybe even more assertive steps should be taken.

The subject is a delicate one because there is such enjoyment of this little bird. But is there not enjoyment of the others too? And it is a sensitive area because the House Wren is a protected species (should it be?) and it is illegal to tamper. But are not all these houses a form of tampering?

We invite and encourage you to write (or call) and share your observations, experiences, evidence (pro and con) and feelings on this matter.

Reprinted from Wings, the newsletter of the Johnson County, Iowa, Songbird Project, Summer 1993.

** Wilson Bulletin, September 1925. “Additional Evidence Against the House Wren.” Copies of the “wren debate” articles gathered to date are available from the Johnson County Songbird Project, 1320 Grabin Road NW, Oxford, IA 52322.*

Save the date! BAN to host NABS 2020

Bluebirds Across Nebraska will host the North American Bluebird Society's 2020 national convention in conjunction with our own annual state conference in Kearney, Nebraska, during the Sandhill Crane migration.

BAN has been honored to host the NABS convention twice before — in 2003 and 2008. Because we are aware of the time and many details involved in planning such a large event, BAN will not hold its annual conference in March 2019. Instead, we promise to make our 2020 joint conference worth the wait.



Please plan to join the migration to Kearney in March 2020. More information and details will be coming!

Members: We want to hear from you!

You can always contact us with success stories, questions, comments, concerns or "error advisories" via email at info@bbne.org. We will respond to all emails received! Or write to us at P.O. Box 67157, Lincoln, NE 68506-7157.



Bluebirds Across Nebraska

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Calendar of events | Mark your calendar and save the date

2018

Aug. 25 Corps of Discovery Welcome Center, Yankton, S.D., third annual Discovery Day. Visit BAN's bluebird information display. Boxes, poles, box kits and BAN memberships will be sold.

Sept. 15-16 Fourteenth annual Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park. This free family event is designed to introduce or rekindle family's interest in natural resources and outdoor recreation. The day is filled with entertainment, outdoor education, sports and recreation — something for everyone to touch, see and do! Get involved — volunteer to help at BAN's booth. You can take a break in the shade for a while to allow another BAN member a chance to enjoy the event. Contact Steve Eno at 402-783-3011 or cleno@aol.com to volunteer.

Nov. 11 BAN fall potluck meeting at Roca Community Center, 15545 B St., Roca; 1 p.m. potluck followed by 2 p.m. meeting.

2019

Feb. 17 BAN winter potluck meeting at Roca Community Center, 15545 B St., Roca. 1 p.m. potluck followed by 2 p.m. meeting.

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