



## Eastern Meadowlark Returns to Grasslands Habitat



More than 1,500 birds came through Wild Nest in 2022, and each one was a distinguished guest. But one beauty—the Eastern Meadowlark—charmed volunteers.

"The meadowlark was so unexpected," said Executive Director Nancy Eilen. "Birds like finches and wrens make their homes alongside ours and are the most likely to encounter a threat—a free-roaming cat, a window, a fast-moving car. But the meadowlark is a bird of farms and grasslands. I never thought one would come to rehab."

The patient came to Wild Nest from a veterinary hospital north of Atlanta. A local resident had brought in the recently fledged bird. The fledgling was on the ground, and its parents, who were given time and space to return, had been lost to natural or human hazards.

At first, the meadowlark was hand-fed at Wild Nest. As it grew, it fed itself mealworms, nuts, fruits, and veggies. "And crickets!" Eilen added. "He really enjoyed them."

Volunteers are careful not to entertain or play with the birds so as not to habituate them to humans. The patients are wild creatures returned to their natural habitats as soon as they can care for themselves. But while in rehab, they sometimes can't help but entertain the volunteers.



"The meadowlark's colors are so beautiful, and he seemed so *playful*," said volunteer Laura Hunt. "I know he was practicing instinctive behavior, but it was hilarious to see him play with his bedding and run through his 'grass'."

When the meadowlark arrived at Wild Nest, volunteer Sonja Contin fashioned a box with thin strips of waving paper so the bird could approximate the feel of running through grass. He tossed up the lining of his cage as if searching for insects in leaf litter.

"I love watching how each species goes into its own instinctive mode," Hunt said.

The meadowlark practicing its skills likely served it well. About two months after arriving at Wild Nest, he was released at Brandon Farm, a birding hotspot near where he was found. "Hotspots" develop on the eBird app, supported by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which encourages birders to report sightings by location.

"If anyone spots a meadowlark at Brandon Farm, it could be the one we released there," Eilen said. "Please give him my regards."

For more information (and entertainment), see Wild Nest's Facebook page for a video of the meadowlark that traces its time in rehab and release into the wild.

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## Volunteers Install Bluebird Houses at Legacy Park





Twenty-one bluebird boxes now stand ready for tenants at Legacy Park, thanks to a partnership between Wild Nest and Decatur Makers (DM), a nonprofit space where people make things.

Talking with Wild Nest's facilities manager, Dave Butler, long-time maker Tommy Barrow offered 10 bluebird boxes that he and family members built one weekend. When Barrow mentioned the birdhouses to DM Executive Director Kalia Morrison, she committed the makers to building another 10 boxes, supplying the posts, and installing the houses. Dan McFarland, a woodworker friend, contributed a nest box, and Madeleine Henner, a Legacy Decatur director, suggested locations for the boxes on the park's grounds.



Eastern Bluebirds are common residents of the park and greater Atlanta, and they may have multiple broods during the nesting season from March to October. Wild Nest takes in dozens of injured or orphaned bluebirds, and many are released from rehab into the park. The ones that stick around gorge on mealworms and other foods from feeders next to Wild Nest's aviary.

Using a gas-powered auger to dig post holes, the partners had half the nest boxes installed within four hours. Now Wild Nest is monitoring the boxes to see how many pairs of bluebirds set up house. Please welcome our new neighbors.

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## Help! I Found a Bird!



Injured or orphaned wild birds get expert help and a temporary home at Wild Nest Bird Rehab, located in Decatur's Legacy Park.

"But not too fast," cautions the group's founder and Decatur resident, Nancy Eilen. ["People can guide themselves through a protocol that's on our website to figure out what's best for the bird. If uncertain, they can call us. No bird should be offered food or water until it's fully assessed."](#)

At Wild Nest, most injured birds are accepted immediately. But sometimes a baby bird can be put back in its nest, and other times, patience and distance give a parent the time and space it needs to return to the nest to feed its young.

Wild Nest, which took in more than 1,500 birds from the metro Atlanta area last year, is a vital contributor to wildlife conservation.

["Our goal,"](#) said Dave Butler, Wild Nest's facilities manager, ["is to return every possible bird to the wild. The cottage at Legacy Park gives us the room to care for birds at all life stages—from infants to juveniles to adults."](#)

Butler spearheaded the effort to construct an outdoor aviary adjacent to the cottage. Birds almost ready for release often spend time in the aviary to experience the outdoor air and test their wings in a space larger than a cage allows.

"Many birds are returned to the area where they were found," Eilen explained, "but some bluebirds and finches at Legacy Park were once our patients."

Birds become patients for multiple reasons. Some birds mistake a window for wide open sky and end up harmed by a window strike. Some birds are the victims of free-roaming cats or dogs that instinctively pounce on an unsuspecting bird. Too many birds get caught in sticky bug traps and harm themselves trying to get free. Wild Nest cares for birds with broken necks, wings, or legs. The rehab specialists administer antibiotics and other medications as needed. And volunteers hand feed birds or make sure they have enough avian salad, seed, or mealworms to feed themselves.

"I wish we could invite the public to see our work," said Eilen, a federally licensed rehabilitator, "but our license prohibits visitors. Also, caretakers try not to imprint on the birds so they can be successfully released. But anyone age 18 or older can volunteer. During baby season, we need all hands. We also appreciate donations."



Volunteers help with bird care, data entry and administrative jobs, as well as marketing and fundraising. For information, see [www.wildnestbirdrehab.org](http://www.wildnestbirdrehab.org). While Wild Nest is

licensed to handle songbirds only, volunteers and the website can help locate rehab specialists for raptors (such as hawks), water birds, and other birdlife.

[“Walk down any street in Decatur,” Eilen said, “and you’re bound to see birdfeeders and birdhouses in front or back yards. More and more, people are adding native plants. Thanks to caring residents, Decatur is a very good place to be a bird.”](#)

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## Volunteer Profile

### Setting a Standard:

An all-volunteer organization like Wild Nest could struggle with consistency. But thanks to volunteers like Lauren Wilson, the birds that come through rehab and their caretakers have someone they can count on.

Every Monday morning, Wilson starts her work week with Wild Nest’s early morning shift.

“Coming in just once a week helps protect me from getting too attached to the patients,” Wilson said. “Often I don’t know what’s happened to any individual bird.”

Not getting attached is vital since Wild Nest’s patients are bound for release in the wild. What’s more, as Zoo Atlanta’s Curator of Birds, Wilson has a lot of birdlife on her mind—from Chilean Flamingos at the zoo to just-hatched Carolina Wrens in rehab.

[“We’re fortunate that someone of Lauren’s caliber volunteers with us,”](#) said Nancy Eilen, Wild Nest’s Executive Director. [“She has a full-time job but helps us in so many ways while also studying to be a licensed rehabber herself.”](#)

Wilson provides bird care, serves on Wild Nest’s board of directors, and serves as chair of the Husbandry Committee, Training Supervisor, and interim chair of the Volunteer Committee.

For this year’s baby season, the Husbandry Committee introduced new protocols for feeding and weighing the birds to guide them along to self-feeding and release.

[“We focused on developmental milestones, like increasing the time between feedings when the birds were gaining weight,”](#) Wilson explained. [“Having their weights recorded gave us an objective measure of their progress. That’s important because we have lots of people serving different shifts.”](#)



What motivates Wilson to give so freely of her time and expertise is conservation—the opportunity to right the wrongs that led to the massive loss of North American songbirds since the 1970s.

“Every songbird that goes back into the wild,” Wilson says, “is a bird added to the breeding population. Every bird that reproduces helps slow the decline.”

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***Ahhh...those cute kitties...***



[Learn to bring your outdoor cat indoors on this resource from the Humane Society.](#)

About 30 percent of all birds received by Wild Nest have been injured by cats, and the rate is even higher for birds that have just left the nest. Wild Nest strongly supports an indoor-only policy for cats.

“It’s definitely best,” said Melanie Furr, Wild Nest’s marketing committee chair. “The Humane Society of the United States says that free-roaming cats live only about 3 years



while indoor cats can reach 12 to 18 years. And sadly, free-roaming cats kill more than 2 billion birds in the United States each year. For both birds and cats, that's a lot of life lost."

Cats can also be a source of rabies and expose people to the virus. Similarly, a parasite that causes toxoplasmosis—a flu-like disease—can come from contact with cat feces.

"I love my cats," Furr said, "but to keep them safe and protect the health of my family, we keep them indoors."

For help transitioning an outdoor cat to the indoors, the National Wildlife Federation and Paws (a rehab nonprofit) provide useful tips. For cats impossible to keep inside, an innovative product from Birdsbefree may help. The product is a brightly colored cover for a cat collar that relies on birds' ability to see color and therefore see a cat before it attacks.

"It isn't ideal," acknowledges Furr, "but maybe it will save a life."

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