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Saturday, Mar 17, 2007

**PIONEER PRESS** Posted on Fri, Mar. 16, 2007

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# Obituary David Ahlgren / Pilot's bluebird houses dot Minnesota

## Officials credit him with much of state's success in raising bird's numbers

BY NICK FERRARO

Pioneer Press

For each of the past 25 Minnesota springs, David Ahlgren would work in his sawdust-covered shop for hours on end, crafting bluebird houses that combined his woodworking skills with his love of nature.

Ahlgren cut more than 85,000 of the cedar and clapboard houses — most of which he packaged and sold at cost to bird enthusiasts and shops around the world or donated to schools and nonprofit groups, said his wife, Jan.

"He would start before breakfast and work 18 hours a day, seven days week," she said Thursday. "And the phone was ringing in the house for him constantly."

Services will be held today for Ahlgren, a bluebird enthusiast and conservationist who died Tuesday of prostate cancer. The Stillwater resident and former Northwest Airlines pilot was 67.

In the early 1980s, state conservation official Carrol Henderson approached Ahlgren after hearing about his carpentry skills and asked him to review birdhouse designs Henderson had gathered for his book "Woodworking for Wildlife."

"He suggested improving the designs by eliminating as many angled cuts as possible and converting many of the plans into a

simple 'one board' design," Henderson said Thursday. "It was a stroke of genius."

At the time, Henderson oversaw expansion of the bluebird conservation effort in the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources nongame wildlife program.

Henderson soon asked Ahlgren if he would be willing to build bluebird houses for the DNR's statewide workshops. Ahlgren not only agreed to do so, but also built 600 of them — at no charge — using a design perfected by Dick Peterson, of Brooklyn Center.

Those initial workshop creations helped boost the state's Bluebird Recovery Program, now considered one of the nation's most successful, Henderson said.

Ahlgren was "one of the main instigators" in bringing the bluebirds back to Minnesota, said Dorene Scriven, a former committee chairwoman of the program, which is a branch of the National Audubon Society's Minneapolis chapter.

When the program started in 1979, Scriven said, bluebirds were rare. Volunteers reported 11 pairs of them across the state.

"We now have people who report to us from all over the state, and they ended up with over 16,000 fledged bluebirds last year," said Scriven, who added the recovery effort has expanded across the nation.

Ahlgren also was involved with the state's trumpeter swan restoration project. Each June, from 1986 through 1988, Ahlgren and Henderson made trips to central Alaska with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials and pilot Rod King to collect eggs from nests and bring them back to Minnesota.

Ahlgren also helped with swan releases at the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge near Detroit Lakes, Minn.

"Dave was a pilot. He knew the beauty of flight, and he made a difference in helping put wild birds like swans and bluebirds back in the sky that had been missing for many years," Henderson said.

Ahlgren was born near Madison, Wis., in 1939 and graduated from the University of Wisconsin. He served in the Wisconsin Air National Guard before joining Northwest. He retired from the airline in 1999.

A service will be held at 11 a.m. today at Trinity Lutheran Church, 115 Fourth St., Stillwater, with a visitation an hour prior at the church. Burial will be at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

In addition to his wife, Ahlgren is survived by his sister, Peggy Ahlgren, of Spring Green, Wis.

In a 2001 Pioneer Press article about his bluebird boxes, Ahlgren spoke about the importance of what he called "entry-level environmental stewardship."

"The thing about bluebird boxes is that they don't work if you just put them up and leave them," he said. "You have to pay attention to it, and attend to it, and often it's a start of something else, like planting trees or landscaping for wildlife. It's entry-level environmental stewardship. That's what's so exciting about bluebird boxes."

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