

## Laurel couple starts birdhouse project to take on mosquitoes

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By KATIE V. JONES | LAUREL LEADER | JUN 21, 2019 AT 7:00 AM



Birdhouses

Carol and Bob Relitz, of Laurel, donated birdhouses for tree swallows to be placed around Riverfront and Granville Gude parks to help control the mosquito population. (Nate Pesce / For Baltimore Sun Media Group)

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Carol Relitz is allergic to mosquitoes and gets huge welts that take forever to go away, forming on her wherever the insects decide to feast. When she and her husband, Bob, moved to Laurel five years ago, they soon discovered that their Victoria Falls' neighborhood – which they love – had a mosquito problem.

Carol went to work.

While looking for an environmentally friendly way to kill mosquitoes, she came upon the tree swallow, a native bird that consumes about 2,000 insects per day according to the Audubon Society, a fact confirmed by a neighbor, Ken Cohen, who is the president of Prince George's Audubon Society. "One of the reasons I encouraged them to go after the tree swallow is because I have seen them when out and in the area," Cohen said. "[Tree swallows'] numbers have fallen in the last 10 to 15 years. It's like the field of dreams: If you build it, they will come."

Soon, Carol had Bob building birdhouses in his workshop — "He's retired," she said — and placed them along their property. That was only the beginning.

Realizing they had a good alternative way to fight mosquitoes, Carol and Bob approached Joanne Hall-Barr, the director of Parks and Recreation, last fall to gauge interest in placing donated birdhouses in city parks. We

would love to do that,” Hall-Barr said. “Mosquitos are a problem and this was a green initiative. Anything we can do to minimize the mosquito population is a good thing.” Birdhouses were installed at Granville Gude and Riverfront parks. To fund the project, Carol reached out to local businesses and community groups to sponsor a birdhouse by decorating it.

“It was amazing,” Carol said, of the public’s support. “It was a community program and people wanted to be involved and get their name out there.” Elizabeth Cope, an artist, and her 11-year-old son Cody each painted a birdhouse. “I thought it was a good cause,” said Cope, who is part of Whimsy Tree Art, an art co-operative in Laurel. “I was happy to take part and do what little I could.”

A total of 17 plain birdhouses were sponsored and decorated in a variety of styles, from realistic to whimsical. Businesses were allowed to place only their logos on the buffers of the birdhouses. “They are pieces of art.” Hall-Barr said. “They are a great addition.”

Originally to be installed on Jan. 31, the project was delayed due to cold weather and frozen ground. Eleven were installed at Granville Gude Park and six at Riverfront. Once installed at Granville Gude Park, many of the houses were then uprooted and moved in the spring in order to allow room for the city to dredge the lake. Only recently have all the houses been reinstalled in their original, or close to, positions. “That’s why some don’t have nests yet,” Carol explained, as she stopped and peeked into several empty boxes along the path on a warm Monday afternoon.

It was easy to find the occupied houses as chirping noises and a swooping tree swallow parent, when one got too close, gave them away. Cohen said that typically the birdhouses are coupled facing back-to-back to attract more birds, though not necessarily tree swallows. “A tree swallow would chase out another tree swallow but not a bluebird,” said Cohen, adding that bluebirds eat insects, too, but not at the same rate as tree swallows.

Granville Gude Park, however, has reached its limit for birdhouses at 11, Carol said, as the city does not want any more at that location. The city’s other parks, however, could use them, they were told. She and Bob plan to approach Scout troops, community groups and school groups with the idea of building birdhouses for the city’s other parks. “I will give the plans to anybody to get started,” Bob said, adding that materials cost about \$45 for the wood, pipe and buffers. To allow winter birds some shelter, the birdhouses should be emptied of debris in the early spring, he said. “Hopefully, they will weather pretty well,” Bob said. “I used a special urethane that we’re hoping is more durable.”

Theft is always a possibility. Three birdhouses have already been taken from Riverfront Park. “We know things are subject to vandalism,” Hall-Barr said. “Unfortunately, it is part of what we experience every day. “I hope somebody saw them and brought them home and put them up somewhere.” Carol and Bob plan to donate three birdhouses to replace the ones stolen at Riverfront park. “We will not decorate them,” Carol said. “We will just put them outside.”

The whirlwind project has taught Carol much about birds, city politics and more. “I learned more than I ever wanted to know,” Carol said. “I did it all in five months.” She and Bob do take joy in what they created for the park. “It is really cool,” Carol said. “A lot of these sponsors live or work close by and do walk the trails.”

People stop and read them.