

## Union, ME

by Virginis Wright

**Everyone is welcome in Union, Maine.** Signs on roads coming into town say so, and they invite you to come again as you leave. But the cheery greeting isn't just for people. Those welcome signs are birdhouses—as is every street sign throughout this community of 2,209 people and who-knows-how-many birds. That's more than 150 birdhouses, all duplexes with holes at either end and nearly all occupied during nesting season.

"It's fun because as you drive around town you see little bits of straw hanging out of the holes," says Dodie Davis, curator of the Union Historical Society. Society members are the unofficial birdhouse stewards, gently nagging Public Works when boxes go missing or need repair. Sometimes even good-natured prodding can't free up a busy road crew, however, so volunteer custodians take up the slack.

The spirit of cooperation is crucial because a year ago Union's birdhouse signs—simple pine boxes with yellow lettering—were on the endangered list. "Everyone loved the signs," Davis says, "but the ambulance drivers complained they had to get right on top of them to see them." Adding to the confusion: numerous "Union-style" driveway boxes, birdhouses personalized with homeowners' names, were indistinguishable from road signs at night.

So, with installation of state-sanctioned road signs under way, Union's selectmen went to town meeting with a proposal to remove all the birdhouses except for a dozen or so around the town common.

How the townspeople responded is an example of Yankee ingenuity—if not Yankee thrift. But first, it helps to understand how the birdhouses got there.

Were there a Mr. Union title, it surely would have been bestowed upon the late Robert Heald, owner of a local wood products factory. He served as volunteer fire chief, state representative, and county commissioner and was president of the agricultural fair that every summer draws thousands to town.

It was Heald who first proposed birdhouse signs in 1971 when town

officials were researching names for Union's numerous unmarked roads—Quiggle Brook, Sunk Haze, Rabbit Farm, Bump Hill, and other designations unearthed from tax records, town histories, and local lore. "Bob just went home one night and came up with the idea to make the signs birdhouses," remembers his longtime friend Isabel Abbott.

Heald fashioned the first 45 boxes himself, each a different length to accommodate the street name. "He did beautiful work," Abbott says. "He could do anything, that Bob Heald."

Volunteers, including Abbott, painted the boxes and installed them. The two-apartment units immediately attracted tree swallows, house sparrows, wrens, and bluebirds. News photographs drew mail from all over the country. Upon seeing a picture of the signs, one Indiana man wrote, he ran right out and installed a birdhouse on his own street corner.

For the next 20 years, Heald and his team of volunteers from the Chamber of Commerce and Women's Community Club paid for the boxes and looked after them, replacing those lost to thieves, repairing ones downed by snowplows, and adding new ones as roads were built. When Heald died in 1991, his nephew, Bill Rochon, began making the boxes, but responsibility for maintenance and cost—then about \$1,000 a year—shifted to the town.

So when selectmen presented their plan to drop the bird box program, they were being budget conscious. Emergency-911 technology, with its standard street signs, had reduced birdhouse signs to a frill.

But while selectmen appealed to people's pocketbooks, what they heard were their hearts. "I have seen this town spend money at various times that wasn't wisely spent, and I know it's scarce," said one resident who stood up to speak his mind. "But we have something that's unique and we ought not to lose it."

"We don't want to be like everyone else, do we?" another asked.

Indeed, they didn't. Voters said nay to the selectmen's plan—and then some. They looked at the \$500 budgeted for bird box maintenance and raised it by \$2,000.

That's why today every road in Union is marked with at least two signs—one that pleases emergency crews and one that welcomes birds and cheers people.

"They're part of Union's history," says Abbott, "and the people want to keep them. Definitely."

Virginia Wright is a writer and editor from Cumberland, Maine.


first appeared: 3/10/2002

## Related Stories


If you enjoyed reading this story, *Union, ME*, then you might enjoy these other stories.

- [Champion of Trees](#)
- [Colon, Michigan](#)
- [Portal, AZ](#)
- [My Story 1962-1999](#)
- [Eagle Watch](#)

## Share This Story With Others:

 [email to a friend](#)

 [digg this](#)

 [add to del.icio.us](#)

## Discuss this Article

---

*American Profile* is a division of Publishing Group of America, Inc. All content within this site is ©2006 of Publishing Group of America unless otherwise noted.