

# The Bird Box Bird Box

Summer 2023 Newsletter of the  
Virginia Bluebird Society [www.virginiabluebirds.org](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org)

## Virginia Girl Scout Takes Wing And Wins Gold

By Clark Walter, Charlottesville, Virginia

Any opportunity to celebrate good news is especially welcome these days as we emerge from the mind-numbing, Covid-induced, altered state of reality we've been living. Really good news has come to my attention that I need to share because we all have cause to celebrate an outstanding young lady. This young lady is a shining example of fierce and focused determination. She is making the world a better place in many ways, one of which is helping Eastern Bluebirds that are near and dear to us all. There's more, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Before I go any further, please let me have the pleasure of introducing you to Cassidy Greenwalt.

Cassidy is a sophomore at Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia. She has two older brothers who attend Old Dominion University and Northern Virginia Community College. Cassidy and her remarkable parents Grant and Colleen are actively involved in their community on a variety of levels. Inspired by her family's rich oral history of scouting adventures, Cassidy joined the Girl Scout Daisies in kindergarten and has remained active in Girl Scouts to this day. It's hard to imagine anyone having earned more merit badges than Cassidy. I counted 60+ on her sash. There's more to Cassidy's story and we're just getting started.

Cassidy was recently recognized by Girl Scouts of America. Notably, it was her Eastern Bluebird project that earned Cassidy the Girl Scouts of America's highest honor – the Gold Award. Quite remarkably, Cassidy also received Girl Scouts second highest honor – the Silver Trefoil Award. The Silver Trefoil Award required 100 hours of volunteer service that Cassidy began when she was in elementary school. That's another story remarkable on its own merits other than for the significant fact that her Silver Trefoil volunteer service crossed paths with bluebirds. Cassidy's elementary school had a bluebird trail and that's how bluebird things got started.

Bluebirds inspired Cassidy and that led to receiving guidance from her teacher which in turn led to Cassidy being trained by Virginia Bluebird Society trail monitor Elizabeth Gearin. Empowered and eager, Cassidy began monitoring a bluebird trail.... (forgive me for shouting)... IN THE 4<sup>TH</sup> GRADE!

Bluebirds were high on her list when it came time to consider options for her Gold Award project be-

*Continued on page 2*



*Cassidy installing a nest box at Bon Air Park.*

*Photo by Colleen Holland.*



*Cassidy picking up nest boxes at Clark's in Charlottesville last fall.*

*Photo by Colleen Holland.*



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Cassidy attaching a VBS identification label after installing a nest box at Bon Air Park.

Photo by Colleen Holland.

cause, as Cassidy puts it, “I knew it so well.” On the other hand, a Girl Scout Gold Award project sets a very high standard. Gold Award requirements are stringent and must meet specific criteria. For example, a Gold Award project must have a global impact and, once up and running, must be self-sustaining. Once Cassidy’s project had been created and set in motion, it had to maintain a life of its own with no direction and/or involvement from Cassidy.

Preparing the proposal for Cassidy’s Gold Award project was in itself an arduous task that required significant project management planning. The proposal required clearly stated goals, detailed action steps to achieve those goals, a timeline, measurable outcome objectives by which she could judge the project’s progress, and as previously stated, a plan to assure the project’s long-term sustainability moving forward under its own power.

Over many months Cassidy wrote and rewrote, thought and rethought the intricate details vital to her proposed project. The proposal required Cassidy to recruit an experienced team equipped with appropriate skills and experience to serve as her mentoring resource when called upon. It was clear that Cassidy was to be in charge of her project and responsible for calling upon and utilizing her resources as she saw fit. Cassidy was to drive the bus. Cassidy submitted her Gold Award project proposal “Installing a Bluebird Trail for Bon Air Park.” Briefly summarized, her stated goals were to organize, in-

stall and monitor a new Bluebird trail with the end goal of using the trail and bluebirds to educate children. Her project proposal was approved by the Girl Scouts Nation’s Capital Council and Cassidy’s project officially began this past September. Five nest boxes were installed to start the new trail at Bon Air Park which was soon designated as a Virginia Bluebird Society trail. The installation of nest boxes is a day that Cassidy remembers fondly as she reminisced, “...I loved that day installing nest boxes with friends and family. We all had fun, but what really hit me was I could see the whole project coming together. It was really happening!”

And really happen it did. Cassidy finished her part of the project this past February and turned it over to others who will carry it forward on the Bluebird trail at Bon Air Park and in elementary school classrooms utilizing the Bluebird education program curriculum and visual aids created by Cassidy.

Her team included Matthew Van Hook and his wife Deborah Chotner as trail monitors. Matthew and Deborah are avid Virginia Bluebird Society trail monitors as well as certified Virginia Master Naturalists. Coincidentally, their daughter Rebecca was Cassidy’s first grade teacher who a few years later would introduce Cassidy to her (Rebecca’s) parents. That was the start of a beautiful relationship around bluebirds. As her long-term bluebird mentors, Matthew and Deborah have grown to love and deeply admire Cassidy. They’re not alone as you will soon see.

Her team also included Glebe Elementary School students and herself among others. Progress was tracked. Measurable timeline objectives were met. The education component of her program started with the

Environmental Club at Yorktown High School and ended with ten sessions teaching over 200 elementary school children about bluebirds. Cassidy ended each session with a survey she developed to measure participants’ retention of Bluebird information and their level of interest in bluebirds. Cassidy was truly inspired by the high number of children who could identify bluebirds, knew their habits, and had expressed a high level of interest in bluebirds moving forward.

On May 13, 2023, in a packed high school auditorium in Springfield, Virginia, something good happened and I was honored to be there to see it. Cassidy received Girl Scouts of America’s highest and most prestigious Gold Award honor AND the second highest honor, Silver Trefoil.

Girl Scout Troop #4467 Advisor Laura Crouch described Cassidy as “a fantastic Girl Scout, student, and community volunteer.” Laura vividly recalled many community projects created and achieved by Cassidy over the years that extend all the way back to Cassidy’s early elementary school years. For example, Cassidy’s mom Colleen worked at the Pentagon and survived 911 while other friends and colleagues did not. Cassidy and her mom later



Cassidy giving one of many Bluebird presentations at Glebe Elementary School.

Photo by Colleen Holland.



## *Girl Scout, Continued from Page 2*

attended a 911 memorial celebration at the Pentagon on an extremely hot day. Cassidy could not help but notice people suffering in the heat and some even passing out. That touched and inspired Cassidy to design and produce fans that read “Never Forget.” She learned all about what is required to produce the fans including designing, printing, and assembly, and then she made it happen. Cassidy donated all fans produced to the 911 Foundation to be made available for future 911 Memorial Celebrations.

Laura also described Cassidy as being an ever-constant presence at Glebe Elementary School during the education component of her Gold Award project. Reliance on Cassidy grew, and teachers often requested her volunteer assistance in matters large and small. Cassidy produced instructional visual aids for her bluebird education program that remain with the school for future use. She assisted the teachers in a wide variety of ways and was a familiar figure in the classroom. Laura was with Cassidy at the school one day as children with their parents were passing by. Suddenly a child yells out to his parents while pointing at Cassidy, “Look! There’s my teacher!” It’s hard to imagine that anyone at any age could receive a greater compliment. In the relatively small field of Gold Award recipients nationwide, most are seniors in high school, very few are juniors and even fewer are sophomores like Cassidy. Cassidy intends to stay with Girl Scouts through high school expressing, “I like being with my friends and the camaraderie.” It goes without saying that Cassidy will be leading the way as she inspires Girl Scouts (and the rest of us) every step of the way.

I could go on and on about the many things that Laura, Matthew, Deborah, and others told me that Cassidy has done like recycling advocacy projects, classes on invasive species and their effects on other cavity nesting birds, and more, but space won’t allow. Suffice it to say that you would laugh, and you might cry as good hearts will do when they hear good things. Cassidy is involved in local theater productions and is casting an eye towards being a costume designer. She was recently involved with three sold-out performances of “Beauty and the Beast” at Yorktown High School and loved every minute of being a part of the production.

You have now met Cassidy Greenwalt and have some measure of how she is making the world a better place. Cassidy advanced the mission of Girl Scouts of America by leading the way and doing her part to exemplify the highest standards of what it means to be a Girl Scout. She has also advanced the mission of the Virginia Bluebird Society to protect, conserve and educate about bluebirds. She has also advanced the mission of Virginia Master Naturalists who, like Matthew Van Hook, Deborah Chotner, and this author, collaborate with VBS to monitor bluebird trails statewide. We are thankful to Cassidy for moving us forward with a purpose.

If I can achieve only one thing this very minute by introducing you to Cassidy Greenwalt, it is to share the hope that Cassidy’s fierce and focused determination inspires for a better world.

*Clark Walter is a Virginia Master Naturalist and bluebird trail monitor in Charlottesville. He was the Virginia Bluebird Society’s Volunteer of the Year in 2016. In a former life he headed up the Cleveland Zoological Society in a public/private partnership in support of the publicly owned and operated Cleveland Metroparks Zoo. He was Vice President of North America’s largest conservation facility, the 10,000 acre The Wilds, focusing on national and international collaborations for research and education in a free-range habitat for endangered species including some of the rarest animals on Earth from Africa, Asia and North America.*

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## Help Wanted

This fall, VBS will be bursting with constructive change and opportunity! You will be asked to approve several Bylaw revisions, one of which will be – going forward – Officers and Directors will serve terms of just one year.

Some Board members will be leaving the nest, creating opportunity for new faces. You don’t need a PhD in Eastern Bluebird husbandry to qualify. Just bring your love of Bluebirds, your enthusiasm, and your creativity. You can become a part of the VBS leadership team and get to know the inner workings of one of the most successful conservation organizations in history.

Come to learn, to create and to make a difference while you enjoy the journey and the camaraderie of like-minded folks. Several Board positions will become available. A complete list is shown below. First come, first served!

- o President
- o President-Elect
- o VP – Trails
- o VP – Education
- o Secretary
- o and three (3) Director positions

Want to toss your hat in the nest? Not sure, but want to know more? Either way, send an email to [vbs@virginiabluebirds.org](mailto:vbs@virginiabluebirds.org).

## Seeking volunteers!

Not quite ready to commit to a VBS board position, but ready to dip your toe in the nest?

VBS has been invited to have a display table at the State Fair of Virginia, which runs Friday, September 22 through Sunday, October 1. Traditionally, we have had a presence Friday through Sunday of both weekends. It's a great opportunity to share your knowledge of Bluebirds with the public, and I guarantee you'll get to meet and chat with some wonderful people. Interested? Available? Send an email to [vbs@virginiabluebirds.org](mailto:vbs@virginiabluebirds.org).

## Barcroft Bluebirds

By Liz Macklin, Arlington Regional Master Naturalist, and Barcroft Bluebird Team

Under trees and in clearings just off trails in Arlington's Barcroft Park, Ron Knipling and his team first installed nineteen wooden birdhouses. In March 2023, with trail leader Mark Colgan, Manoma Sirisena, and Emily Apgar took tools in hand and set up two new boxes designed specifically for bluebirds. They chose sites in grassy areas free from overhanging branches and with plenty of insects to sustain the birds and their young. The bluebird houses, protection baffles, and poles were donated by the Virginia Bluebird Society, with the President Valerie Gaffney assisting with the installation of the birdhouses. Since beginning in March and through every week this summer, volunteers from Arlington Regional Master Naturalists (ARMN) will continue to monitor the birdhouses for nesting activity.

An online log documents the weekly observations of the monitoring team. In early April, volunteers installed VBS tags and numbered each box. Around April 2, chickadees built nests in four boxes. That day's entry read "a few pieces of moss in the bird box indicating a chickadee presence... be aware what additional nest material, if any, is used."

Bluebirds arrived around April 7 with straw nesting material showing up in the new birdhouse, Box #15. The next week a bluebird flew out as monitors approached. Manoma described a cup-shaped nest with no eggs. Anticipation mounted, and on April 19, Emily peered inside to find three eggs. Within a week the count rose to five. On April 27, Mark walked to #15 with wildlife photographer David Howell, who captured images of male and female birds as they caught insects and watched over their nest. By May 5 four nestlings had hatched.

Meanwhile monitors still tracked all four chickadee nests. On April 27 three boxes held eggs or live nestlings, but in the fourth, several chicks had disappeared, and the two remaining had died.

On May 19 Mark discovered a five-foot-long Eastern Rat Snake only a foot from Bluebird Box #15. A mother bird waited in a tree. The snake paused but then slid away. Less than a week later Mark, along with Alonso Abugattas, Natural Resource Manager for Arlington County, found the snake coiled under the baffle. The device prevented the snake from climbing the pole. While the baffle saved the bluebirds, the chickadees suffered continuing losses. More chicks disappeared and died in locations with no protective shield to ward off snakes. At a third site equipped with a baffle, six eggs vanished, possibly removed by a House Wren. In all, only eight chickadees seemed to have fledged successfully.



*Eastern Rat Snake attempting to enter Bluebird Box #15 at Barcroft Park.*

As the population of chickadees declined, House Wrens built nests in their place, but evidence of missing nestlings and a cracked egg pointed to continued threats by predators.

On May 23, the day they saw the snake, Mark and Alonso discussed changes to improve the birds' survival. Alison Davis-Holland, VBS County Coordinator, agreed. The two newest birdhouses will remain in place with four more durable ones added at the end of the summer – all equipped with protective baffles.

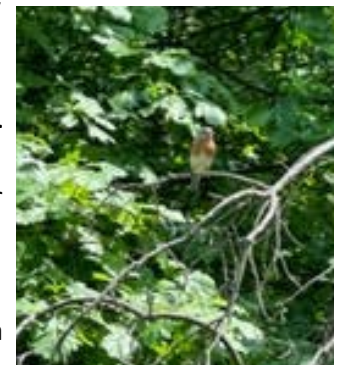
For the bluebirds, success came with the new Box #15. It is believed that five young birds fledged. On June 10, Mark cleaned out the nest, providing a chance for the birds to build a second nest this summer.

And how have volunteers responded? In the words of Emily Apgar, "My knowledge has grown in leaps and bounds, observing how the birds, particularly the bluebirds, react and interact with their environment. I'm really looking forward to next season."



*Male Eastern Bluebird at Barcroft Park.*

*Photo by David Howell.*



*Female bluebird waiting in a tree near her nest.*

## A Shout Out to Ann Dunn

By Doug Rogers, Charlottesville, VBS Vice President, Trails

With the help of Ann Dunn, back in 2007, I started my Bluebird Trail. It was on three pieces of private property – Martha Jefferson Hospital, The Worrell Property, and a piece managed by The Virginia Land Company – and I think I started with twelve boxes.

Since it was private land, Ann donated some boxes, predator guards and poles; I got the rest. Ann was there to assist with the siting of the boxes, and she even helped with the pole pounding! (I might add that I will never ask a woman how much she weighs but from having been in the health insurance business for many years, I can make a good guess. And I am sure that Ann only tips the scales at a number barely into three digits.) And she was out there with me pounding poles!

With Ann's help and guidance, I got the trail up and running. Over the years I have relied on her guidance to thwart the best efforts of black snakes, House Sparrows, blow flies and unidentified predators. Ann has always been available to assist, not only with my trail but with the many grants I have worked on for the VBS' New & Refurbished Trails Grant program.

Recently I approved a grant for ten complete setups and a second one for twelve complete setups. By then, we had nearly depleted the large supply of nest box materials VBS bought last fall. So, I had to make an additional twelve snake baffles.

I had to go to the three Lowe's stores in Albemarle County to get all of the metal. Then I had to get the holes drilled in the snake baffle caps. Last fall I gave away most of my tools, so I needed some help. Here is a photo of Ann in her workshop in her basement drilling those holes with her drill press!

What a lady!! She got it done.

Ann has been very gracious in providing storage space for a lot of the VBS inventory and assisting with handing the materials out for my grants.

Ann will be stepping down from her VBS Board position of managing the nesting data for VBS this fall. VBS and I owe her a deep debt of gratitude for all the years she has been such an active and effective Board Of Directors member. Countless bluebirds are "out there" as a result of her efforts.

A big Shout Out to Ann Dunn!!



Ann Dunn in her basement workshop drilling hole in snake baffle caps.

Photo by Doug Rogers.

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## Nest Box Competition - Tufted Titmouse, Eastern Bluebird, House Wren

By Christine Boran, County Coordinator for Floyd and Patrick Counties

For the first time on the Woolwine House Bluebird Trail, Patrick County, in the trail's 17 years, I found my first Tufted Titmouse Nest. Six eggs were laid. I was excited. However, the titmouse is very sensitive to human activity and monitoring. This nest box location has had bluebirds year after year, with successful fledgings; we know this species is tolerant of humans. What I found later after the titmouse eggs were laid is the nest was, sadly, abandoned. I was not able to investigate why. Was it due to a bluebird nest started over the titmouse nest or was it possible a House Wren, which I heard singing in the vicinity of this nest box on that monitoring day, removed the titmouse eggs, and the bluebird started building a nest, or could it be this nest was too close to very active human presence, causing the titmouse female to abandon the nest? Carolina Wrens can abandon a nest of eggs, as I learned in past years under the lid of my propane tanks near my breezeway door. Later a House Wren built an active nest with an egg cup over the bluebird nest, which did have eggs. All species being native and nest box competition in between each monitoring check made it impossible for me to get more information. It was my hope for the titmouse to have a full nesting cycle in Nest Box 23, but it was not to be.



Tufted Titmouse nest crossview.

Photo by Christine Boran.



Christine Boran  
Tufted Titmouse  
Nestbox 23 - 5/2/23



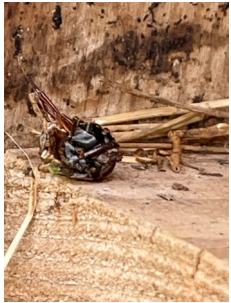
## Altercation In a Nest Box: Bluebird vs. Bald-faced Hornet

By Christine Boran, Patrick County

In April, I found the beginning of a bald-faced hornet's nest (*Dolichovespula maculata*), an aerial yellowjacket, in my Nest Box #32 on the Woolwine House Bluebird Trail in Patrick County. Later that day, I decided to start studying this hornet species in detail, and realized it was the queen hornet creating the wood-pulp cylinder nest and cells to prepare to lay her eggs and tend to the cells to feed the hornet larvae. No hornet's eggs were laid yet by the Queen; therefore, no worker hornets were hatched. Once the workers are hatched, a hornet's nest becomes obviously dangerous for nest box managers to handle the situation. I decided to go back that night to scrape out the small nest on the ceiling with my paint scraper, my own safety in mind. When I returned at 9 PM to do this, I found a deceased bluebird in the nest box. It was dark, and even with my flashlight, I could not determine if the bluebird was male or female, but I did see a few added nesting materials added by the female bluebird after my daytime monitoring check took place earlier. I went back in the morning to investigate this situation. What I found was a deceased female bluebird, and next to her



Hornet nest on bluebird box ceiling.  
Photo by Christine Boran.



Dead bald-faced hornet queen in a bluebird box.

Photo by Christine Boran.

was the deceased queen bald-faced hornet. I studied the deceased bluebird and found nothing visible to determine cause of death. I made a determination from what clues I had that the female bluebird may have tried to snap at the hornet in an attempt to kill it. More than likely there was an altercation right then and there, and she was stung by the hornet. A sting would not be visible if inside her mouth or under her feathers. My theory is the venom sting was too much for the bluebird, and the queen hornet could not survive injury from the bluebird. I have never seen this before on my 17-year old trail where both species had a duel inside the nest box and that both caused fatal injuries to each other. This is a good reason to keep on monitoring our nest boxes on a regular basis and do what we can to assist the birds in successful breeding. Though I support all native species, especially all of our native insects, it became clear how important it is to manage our nest boxes and remove wasp nests as soon as we see them in early forms inside the nest boxes. Though all of my trail box ceilings are soaped to deter wasps, it is a good idea to reapply a thin soap layer to nest box ceilings in early spring at those first checks of the season. Generally, I reapply soap every other season, but even that isn't always foolproof, as it was in my case.

## The Year of the House Sparrow

By Doug Rogers, VBS Vice President, Trails, Charlottesville

This year has been the Year of the House Sparrow for my trail.

I have been battling a male House Sparrow in one of my sets of paired boxes. He has built three nests, which I ripped out. After that, he built a fourth nest in less than a week and there were three eggs in it. Of course, I ripped that out too. Following that, I found a dead male bluebird in the box – the back of his head was pecked open. In spite of that, a pair of bluebirds had started building a nest on top of the body.

So, I assumed that the House Sparrow would kill them too, and set my Van Ert trap. First, I caught a male bluebird and that was followed by trapping a female bluebird. I gave up and removed the trap. The bluebirds returned and built a new nest in the box and Tree Swallows built a nest in the adjoining box. Both fledged babies. The House Sparrow did not return.

In another box that was being haunted by a HOSP, I set the Van Ert trap and trapped a female HOSP. I know that HOSP are invasive; I know that HOSP kill bluebirds; I know that HOSP are considered "rats with wings" but in spite of all that, it still hurts my heart to kill a small bird whose only crime is being hatched as a HOSP. But I did it anyway.



Paired nest boxes for bluebirds and swallows.

Photo by Doug Rogers



Following that, the male HOSP did not return. But Tree Swallows moved into the box and built a nest. It is a box that has had only bluebirds in the past.

Many of you read my reports on my paired boxes, which I did two nesting seasons ago. Keeping the Tree Swallows out of the paired boxes worked well for those two seasons. But now they have figured it out and they are moving into my single boxes which they did not nest in during prior years.

Back to the HOSP, this year HOSP have prevented the nesting of at least 3 nesting attempts by Bluebirds. This is a new record.

Tree Swallow hatchlings, left, and Eastern Bluebird hatchlings, right.

Photos by Doug Rogers.

## Natural Bridge State Park Bluebird Boxes

By Victoria Deppensmith, Natural Bridge, Virginia Master Naturalists, Central Virginia Chapter

Skyline Trail at Natural Bridge State Park has 10 Bluebird boxes along this beautiful trail. This year all boxes have nests except Box 10. The season has already had 14 nesting attempts, 68 eggs, 48 young, and 31 fledglings with two nests ready to fledge this week! Bluebirds and Tree Swallows are the two species of birds that are nesting in the boxes.

Monitoring these boxes is a joy that I do twice a week. The trail is along a meadow with stunning views of the Blue Ridge. Watching the nesting cycle and bird behavior is an amazing experience.

Most of the time, the nesting of the bluebirds and Tree Swallows progress with no issues. This year, however, one box has been desired by both bluebirds and Tree Swallows. The first nesting attempt was started by Tree Swallows and had a few feathers lining the nest and Tree Swallows were observed flying in and out of the box. By the next box check, it had bluebird eggs! The next nesting attempt was also started by Tree Swallows and had a very feathered nests with four eggs. Bluebirds had other ideas! On May 31, it was discovered that bluebirds had built a nest on top of the Tree Swallow nest. It now has four bluebird eggs. Eleven more bluebird eggs are waiting to hatch in two other boxes.

Another interesting observation is the nest construction of Tree Swallows. Usually, they lined their nests with white feathers. The Tree Swallows at Natural Bridge have surprised us with an array of different colored feathers, including pink, the past couple of years. We were puzzled at first and then realized they have a unique place to gather their nest decorations, Natural Bridge Zoo with its collection of exotic birds!

If you're ever near Natural Bridge State Park, take a beautiful hike and watch bluebirds and Tree Swallows fill the air!



## First Graders Monitor the Trail at Bluestone Elementary

By Courtney Sokolowski, Harrisonburg

At Bluestone Elementary School in Harrisonburg, Virginia, the bluebird trail is in its third year. Last year the school voted to make the school mascot a bluebird. So bluebirds are definitely an important part of the school day at Bluestone! First graders have taken the reins to monitor the trail and report progress back to the school. On the last day of school, Ms. Kettelkamp announced that Ms. Schmucker's class had been diligently monitoring the trail. The students erupted with excitement with the news that there are five baby bluebirds. The trail has also had some Tree Swallows hatch as well. Students and staff will keep up monitoring over the summer. An update will be provided at the fall school meeting. This has been an engaging addition to the Bluestone Bluebird community.



*Five bluebird hatchlings.*

*Photo by Jen Kettelkamp.*



*Ms. Kettelkamp announces five hatchlings in the Bluestone Elementary bluebird nestbox.*

*Photo by Courtney Sokolowski.*

## Special Thanks

**In grateful appreciation to the following persons for donations made in support of Virginia Bluebird Society:**

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Joe Wilson  
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Felicia Wright



## Carolina Wren Nest ID

By Anne Little, County Coordinator, Stafford and City of Fredericksburg

The monitors for the trails here in the Fredericksburg area are all familiar with nests and eggs from bluebirds, chickadees, Tree Swallows, House Wrens, and House Sparrows, but there is one nest that sometimes still stumps them. The nest of the Carolina Wren can be a little tricky to identify. The nest is messy like a House Sparrow, has some moss like a chickadee nest, can contain feathers like a Tree Swallow, and then to confuse us all, the Carolina Wren throws in some leaves and sometimes even some twigs. To further compound the confusion, the eggs look a bit like House Sparrow eggs, brown and speckled, but are more reddish on one end, somewhat like a House Wren. They are the same size as House Sparrow eggs, though and cannot be wren eggs because they are too large. The best way to determine if it is a Carolina Wren nest is to look at the nest and notice that there is layering effect of moss, grass or pine needles, and leaves. This layering is not found in house sparrow nests which are mostly messy grass. House sparrows do not use leaves either, so this is another good indicator that it is a Carolina Wren. If in doubt, wait for the eggs. The rust colored speckled eggs with the reddish end is a clear indicator that you have a Carolina Wren nest. Carolina Wrens are native birds protected by state and federal law. They have a beautiful song and are so fun to watch as they poke their beaks into every area of your garden. Lucky you!



Left: Carolina Wren nest with layers of grasses, moss, and sticks. Center: Top view of Carolina Wren nest. Both nest photos by Charles Badal.  
Right: Carolina Wren eggs. Photo by Anne Little

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## Weird Science

by Pam Narney, County Coordinator, Certified Virginia Master Naturalist

On a typical Master Naturalist Ornithology Training Walk at Belle Isle State Park on Saturday, May 20, 2023, I expected to see the usual: local birds like osprey, eagles (and a nest), herons, songbirds, maybe an indigo bunting or a chat. I walked along the trail staring at the usual sights never expecting the unexpected.

Then I saw a flash of blue. Or did I? It disappeared. I waited, and waited. A male bluebird stuck its head out of the cavity, looked around, and flew away.

I was literally speechless. I have monitored bluebird nesting boxes for over 12 years. I found them comfortably living in these boxes but had never before seen one nesting as nature intended in the cavity of a tree. I watched them for a while and continued down the trail.

When I got home, I told my husband John, we have to get better pictures of the bluebirds at Belle Isle. In a cavity? Have you ever seen them use a cavity? Would they still be there? Could I remember which dead tree they had been on? Birds usually maintain one territory, so we should be able to find them again.

A male was perched on a dead limb with a fat caterpillar in his mouth. Dad went to the hole. Stayed a while. Came out on the branch. Ate the bug. Then a youngster landed on the branch. Looked around. Went to the nest hole and peered in looking to be fed. He left and they repeated the pattern.

We know that bluebirds are second cavity nesters but, due to so many trees being cut down, those cavities and that habitat are harder and harder to find. So, the apocryphal scientific texts are right. It is not a myth. Bluebirds do actually nest in secondary cavities.



Far left: Bluebird pair, dad with bug.

Center: Male bluebird on a secondary cavity nest.

Right: Young bluebird looking to be fed

Photos by John Narney

## County Coordinator Spotlight

By Charlene Talcott, State Coordinator

Paula Boundy is the County Coordinator for Lancaster and Mathews Counties. She began her VBS involvement as administrator for Belle Isle State Park in Lancaster. This is how I first met her, as I was a ranger at that park and met her or a pair of monitors every week. She has participated in the construction of some of the boxes, as well as the maintenance.

As much as she loves bluebirds, her first love is native plants. She leads several workshops in using native plants in home landscapes. Several of her designs are in *Native Plants of the Northern Neck*.

Paula served several administrative roles in environmental organizations, including president of Northern Neck Master Naturalists (its first in 2008 and presently), president of Northern Neck Chapter of Virginia Native Plant Society, and president of Northern Neck Audubon Society.



Paula Boundy, County Coordinator for Lancaster and Mathews Counties.

Photo by Skip Penner

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## THREE NEW WAYS TO SUPPORT VBS

We now have three new ways you can support our Society: Tribute Donations, Gift Memberships, and Auto-Renewal Memberships!

**GIVE A TRIBUTE DONATION** <https://virginiabluebirds.app.neoncrm.com/forms/donate1>

Would you like to pay tribute to a special person, friend, or loved one with a gift to VBS? Now you can donate in honor or in memory of someone. With your permission, we will also send an acknowledgement of your donation to a person or organization of your choice. Just indicate that your gift is in honor or memory in the online donation form.

**GIVE A GIFT MEMBERSHIP** <https://virginiabluebirds.app.neoncrm.com/forms/gift-membership-1>

Do you have a friend or loved one who shares your love for bluebirds? Give them the gift of a VBS membership. Your donation of a Gift Membership will help increase the educational and conservation reach of our society, and bring vital new members to our organization!

**ENROLL IN AUTO-RENEW** <https://virginiabluebirds.app.neoncrm.com/login>

You can provide sustaining support to VBS by enrolling in membership auto-renewal when you join, renew, or anytime online. Your credit card will be automatically billed when your membership expires and there will be no interruption in your membership or support for VBS. We'll let you know when your auto-renewal is coming up, and you can cancel online at any time.



Two male bluebirds sharing the good news!

Photo by Hal Moran

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/two-bluebirds-squawking-15307498>

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## 2023 Grant Summary

Data from Doug Rogers, VBS Vice President, Trails

In 2023 the Virginia Bluebird Society issued six grants, totaling \$3,025.93, for installation and upkeep of 19 trails on public and private property throughout the state. These trails included 42 new nesting boxes and the rehab of 37 boxes.

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## VBS Wins Grants to Support Bluebird Projects

The Virginia Bluebird Society recently received grants from the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) for \$1,500 and the River Counties Community Foundation (RCCF) for \$1,500.



The DWR grant supports VBS projects in urban areas and nest cameras in schools and other educational institutions. VBS has been fortunate to receive this annual funding from DWR for the past several years.

The River Cities Community Foundation serves Lancaster, Middlesex, and Northumberland counties. Their grant to VBS will fund the installation of bluebird nest cameras in Lancaster and Middlesex schools. Thanks to Charlene Talcott, VBS County Coordinator, for obtaining this grant for VBS.





## Attracting (and Feeding) Birds with Native Plants—Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)

By Valerie Kenyon Gaffney, VBS President



Photo Courtesy of April Moore, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

### Plant Characteristics

**Duration:** Perennial

**Habit:** Shrub

**Leaf Retention:** Deciduous

**Leaf Complexity:** Simple

**Fruit Type:** Drupe

**Size Notes:** Rarely up to about 20 feet tall. Usually up to about 15 feet tall.

**Leaf:** Green **Autumn Foliage:** yes **Fruit:** Red

**Bloom Color:** White, Yellow, Green

**Bloom Time:** Mar, Apr, May

This shrub does well in shady areas, but also can grow in full sun. It likes moist well-drained soil with a pH range of 5.0-8.0 and has no special nutrient needs. Perhaps best of all, deer tend to avoid it.

Like many of our native *viurnum* and *ilex*, and rarely mentioned when sold, *Lindera benzoin* has a dioecious floral arrangement meaning only 'male' flowers or 'female' flowers on a plant. The female tree produces the ornamental berries, but a male tree is needed for pollination. If your supplier is unable to sex the plants for you, and you are buying bare roots be sure to buy at least a few roots to increase your odds of getting both sexes.

Crushed Spicebush leaves give off the smell of a mix of cloves, anise, and musk, hence its common name. The drupe, a fleshy fruit with a stony seed, can be dried, powdered and used as an 'allspice' in baking. Dried fruits have been used in fragrant sachets, and Native Americans used dried fruits as a spice and the leaves for tea. Early American settlers used dried spicebush bark in place of cinnamon, and during the Civil War, spicebush tea made from dried leaves often substituted for coffee when rations ran short.

Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), the Virginia Native Plant Society 2006 Plant of the Year should be among the top shrubs under consideration for adding to your landscape this fall. The butterflies will love it for its nectar, the birds will love it for its drupes, and think of all the caterpillars available for your Bluebird nestlings in the spring.

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Photo Courtesy James Reveal, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

## The President's Box

July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, it's hot and humid and I have been watching over five precious baby Blues in my backyard nest box all week. This is the fourth, yep, count 'em fourth attempt by this determined female to raise a brood of Blues. Mid-March, first clutch: five eggs that never hatched and one by one she removed all but one egg. Early April, she immediately began laying a second clutch of six eggs, which also didn't hatch. She immediately began building another third nest over top of the second unhatched clutch. Her third try should have been the charm. By May 9 she had laid another five eggs. Counting down the days to hatch day, I began to feel sorry for her. In and out of the box, brooding this third clutch, turning the eggs, doing everything in her power to get them to hatch...and nothing!



On June 4, I removed the third nest along with the second nest hidden beneath it. By June 10 she had built a new nest and began laying eggs yet again. I held my breath and at 5:21 AM on June 27 this fourth clutch of five eggs began to hatch. Eureka! Success at last.

I've been asked what happened. I have no clue but offer two possibilities: after four attempts her mate finally figured out what his role in all this was, or she swapped him out for another male with more experience. In either case, the nestlings are growing like crazy and because my backyard is 99% native plants, Mom and Dad are having no problem keeping up with their hungry brood. And before you ask, it's an [Amazon Blink](#) camera; easy-peasy to set up and it will afford you hours (you've been forewarned!) of entertainment.

On a different note...elsewhere in the newsletter, you'll find information on the availability of VBS merchandise for purchase. It's been a long time coming, but I am personally pleased with the quality of the tee shirts and with the customer service of the vendor. In the coming weeks we'll be adding additional styles and colors of shirts and sweatshirts, as well as mugs and tote bags. I hope you'll take a minute to check out 'the [store](#)' and consider making a purchase, the proceeds from which will go toward supporting [VBS' grant programs](#).

And last, but certainly NOT least...the search for new members of the VBS Board of Directors. There are several positions open for election at the November membership meeting (mark your calendar now: November 4) and I sincerely hope you'll consider tossing your hat into the nest for consideration. As stated elsewhere, it doesn't require a Doctorate of Eastern Bluebird Husbandry, only a desire to have fun, meet new people and help guide the future of this wonderful and important organization. Drop me an email if you would like to know more: [vbs@virginiabluebirds.org](mailto:vbs@virginiabluebirds.org).

Happy Bluebirding!

- vkg

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## Here They Are - New VBS Shirts!

You asked, and we listened. Virginia Bluebird Society is excited to announce we at last have VBS branded merchandise for sale. Tee shirts, sweatshirts, hoodies...we've got it all in an array of styles and colors! Check us out.....place an order...let us know if there's something you want but isn't yet available. We're happy to add more merchandise -- mugs, tote bags, polo shirts for sure!

Shop at [Virginia Bluebird Society | Official Merchandise | Bonfire](#)







Photo by  
Hal Moran

Newsletter of the  
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If you have a new email address, or  
Have recently changed it, please let us  
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We welcome your written items and artwork  
(photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*.

Email your materials to  
[birdboxeditor@gmail.com](mailto:birdboxeditor@gmail.com) .

[www.viriniabluebirds.org](http://www.viriniabluebirds.org)

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## The Bluebird Advisor



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### The Best Bluebird Advice

We have many sources for bluebird advice. The VBS website has lots of good information and the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) is a great go-to site for all things bluebird. One caveat regarding the NABS site is that the information is more generalized because of the large geographic area, the US and Canada, that comprises the NABS audience. The Facebook page, Eastern Bluebird Landlord can often be a source of good information, but with many people weighing in on questions, the advice can sometimes be contradictory and confusing. My go-to place for sound, practical advice is [www.sialis.org](http://www.sialis.org) . Bet Zimmerman Smith has put together an incredible website with extensive research and input from other birders. I go to her site often for information and insight. I have often vowed to read the entire site in order to glean all the information it has to offer, but the site is so extensive, I have never been able to finish it. The one thing that really stands out for me is that Bet does not place herself as the final authority. At the bottom of her intro page she posts this disclaimer *“If you are referencing information on this website, please keep in mind that I am **constantly updating and correcting** it as I learn more, find errors, and as new information becomes available.”* I am so grateful to Bet and her untiring work on educating all of us on bluebird problems and issues. I encourage you to check out her site and to share this valuable resource with others.

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### Thank You

From John Narney, Executive Editor

Many thanks to all who contributed to this edition of “The Bird Box”. This is your newsletter. The editorial staff merely combines and organizes your input. The Box provides a forum for members to exchange ideas and experiences. This is especially important as a source for new bluebirders. Although the Box only asks for your articles three time a year, you needn’t wait for our call. Send the editors your articles as they happen. We are here at [birdboxeditor@gmail.com](mailto:birdboxeditor@gmail.com) all year.

## Mark Your Calendars

- June and July** Continue monitoring nest boxes; check for parasites such as wasps, blowflies, and ants.
- August 30** Deadline for submitting articles, photos, ideas, and artwork for fall newsletter.
- September** Collect trail data and send to county coordinator and State Coordinator Charlene Talcott at [vbluebirdscoordinator@gmail.com](mailto:vbluebirdscoordinator@gmail.com).
- September** State Fair of Virginia: Volunteers needed September 22 - 24 and September 29 - October 1. See page for details.
- November 4, 2023** Annual Membership Meeting, Charlottesville, in-person and virtual. Check your email for further details.

Check out our *Facebook* page <https://www.facebook.com/Virginia-Bluebird-Society-133048243442687/> for photos and videos throughout the year, and follow us on *Twitter* at [https://twitter.com/VA\\_Bluebirds](https://twitter.com/VA_Bluebirds).

## How To Join

Go to [Virginia Bluebird Society](http://www.virginiabluebirds.org) and click on *Support VBS*. You can also join or renew by snail mail. Send your name, address, phone number and/or email address along with a check for  
\$25 for a one-year Individual or Family membership  
\$70 for a three-year Individual or Family membership  
\$60 for a one-year Sustaining membership  
\$50 to sponsor a nest box, to:

**Virginia Bluebird Society**  
726 William Street  
Fredericksburg VA 22401

Membership forms are available on the VBS web site: <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org>

## You are invited ...



to join the North American Bluebird Society! Our Virginia Bluebird Society is an affiliate of NABS which is also a 501c3 non-profit who shares our mission of conservation of native cavity nesting birds. Your support of NABS with a membership provides annual grants in education, conservation, and research. NABS provides a telephone hotline for real time help with nest box problems. NABS provides four issues of *Bluebird*, a color journal, and fact sheets with information on how to become a successful bluebirder. Please support NABS today. More information is available at [www.nabluebirdsociety.org](http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org)

## Send An Article to The Bird Box

*We welcome articles and photos from our active VBS members. We want to share our success stories. Send your original articles, photos, or artwork, or suggest a topic for a future newsletter. Submit materials to John Narney, Executive Editor, and Judy Hall, Editor, at [birdboxeditor@gmail.com](mailto:birdboxeditor@gmail.com) by August 30 to be considered for the fall newsletter. Please include your location, identification of people and birds in photos, and name of photographer or artist. Please send photos separately as jpg files if at all possible.*