

The Bird Box

Fall 2012 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

TRAIL NEWS FROM P.B. SMITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By Barbara Dennee

The 5th grade Ecology Club, the “Bluebirders”, at P.B. Smith Elementary School in Warrenton has been monitoring over 20 nest boxes on school grounds. Monitoring began in early spring and continued through the summer.

These dedicated junior Bluebird conservationists monitored nests, recorded data and took digital photographs of nesting boxes inhabited by E. Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, House Wrens and House Sparrows. The Bluebirders understand that the purpose of monitoring is to keep House Sparrows from using Bluebird boxes, and to check on the general health and safety of the Bluebirds. Soon, all the data will be compiled and sent to the Virginia Bluebird Society. The Bluebirders have learned that the only time you shouldn't open a nesting box is when the nestlings are 12 days old or older. They were taught that the reason for this is the babies may escape from the nest too early. If this happens, the baby Bluebirds will not be able to fly or survive in the wild and... once out of the nest, they do not return.



The Bluebirders have also learned to identify the nests of the other likely occupants; this facilitates the accuracy of the documentation of which species are using the nest boxes. To identify an Bluebird nest, they look for nests made from grasses or pine needles; Tree Swallows line their nests with lots of feathers; the House Wren has a nest of solid twigs and the House Sparrow uses many different materials from nature and humans. A blue ribbon from a recent 5th grade Recognition Diploma was discovered in a House Sparrow's nest which consisted of dried grasses, plastic wrappers and a little Cardinal feather!

An interesting factoid that the Bluebirders discovered - unrelated to nesting - was that Bluebirds eat about 4 grams of food per day. This is equivalent to a 150 pound human eating 18 pounds of food per day!

The Bluebirders are aware that some of the earliest records of Bluebird conservation are in the journals of Henry David Thoreau. In his journal dated April 3, 1852, Thoreau wrote, “The Bluebird carries the sky on his back.” In his writings he expressed concern over the declining Bluebird population due to the decline in available cavity nesting sites. The Bluebirders have been good stewards of the Earth and have taken great care in keeping House Sparrows from taking over the Bluebird nesting boxes.



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Newsletter of the
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We welcome your written items and artwork (photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box!*

E-mail your materials to Doug Rogers.

Last summer's (2011) unseasonably high temperatures appeared to have been the cause of the deaths of seven Tree Swallow babies on the Fluvanna County trail that I monitor. It was a most unsettling occurrence that happened mid-season. With the potential for additional nesting during the remainder of the season, something needed to be done. After reviewing back issues of VBS newsletters and NABS newsletters I came up with the following as a solution.

The trail uses 'Carl Little' boxes that appeared to have adequate ventilation; however the heat build-up was still significant. Looking for a quick way to mitigate the heat build-up, I settled on installing a Styrofoam "heat shield" on the roof of the box. This was done by cutting a Styrofoam square from the side of an old cooler - that I had on hand - the appropriate size to give a one inch overhang on the roof. Taking a cue learned from shading and cooling my greenhouse, spacers were used to set the "heat shield" about an inch above the wood roof. The "heat shield" was attached by drilling screws through the "heat shield" into the roof (but not penetrating the roof).

There was concern that the box now looked somewhat like a space ship and that the birds would not find it very appealing. During the course of the remaining season, however, there was a nesting attempt in one of the modified boxes. Over the winter "heat shields" were added to all of the boxes on this trail.

Fast forward to this 2012 season in which we had very high temperatures for extended periods of time. However, this season the heat has not caused the death of any babies in the "heat shield" nest boxes. All of the boxes have been used for nesting which indicates that the birds, both Bluebird and Tree Swallows, have accepted this modification. I am pleased to report this success.

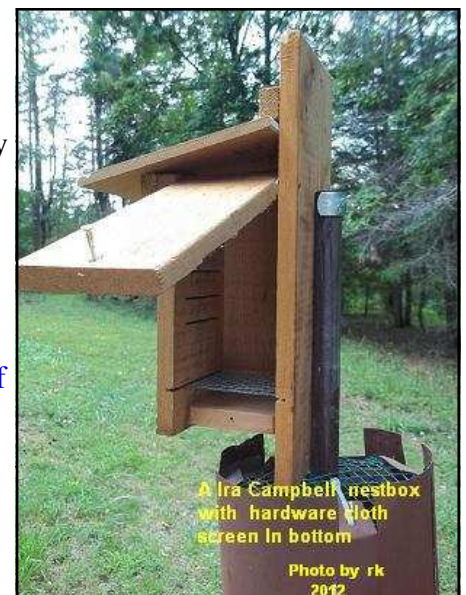


Blow Fly Control

Ira Campbell of Timberville, VA designed the hardware cloth screen for the bottom of nestboxes to deter blowfly parasitism over thirty years ago. He used 3/8 inch(9.525mm) hardware-cloth screen, installed one inch above the box floor. He found that it was the optimum size.

An article on his work can be found in Sialia Volume 4, Number 2(1982) page 49, [Page 11 of 44 of the following LINK](#)

<http://nabluebirdsociety.org/PDF/Sialia%20Bluebird%20Journals/4.2.pdf> -- (15MB)



TANGLEFOOT IS OUT!

By Barbara Chambers

Dear VBS members, Please, remove all Tanglefoot from your buckets and monitoring equipment. Anne Little brought this to my attention a while back. It is dangerous to wildlife. It would NEVER get off an animal's coat or a bird's feathers. And, some of our monitors have not been using it properly either, it seems.

The main reason to not use Tanglefoot is that any animal that comes in contact with it is doomed to a slow death. If it gets on a bird's feathers, or on the hair of a squirrel or a mouse, or on a snake – they will not be able to get it off and it will get in their mouth as they try to remove it and the Tanglefoot will stick in their mouth and choke them and prevent them from getting food or water – an agonizing death. We are killing one animal to save another. Not a great bargain.

In its place, please purchase a jar of Vaseline and use that on the pole to block the way up the pole for ants. The Vaseline will eventually rub or wash off of

an animal and if they lick it – it will go through their system and not cause choking or asphyxiation.

Use the Vaseline ONLY when there is an ant problem or you know that the box is in a problem place for ants. Use any reasonable method to put a good glob all around the pole UP, UNDER THE SNAKE GUARD ONLY. Lift the snake guard up as far as it will go to be sure that the snake guard will cover the Vaseline when lowered.

And here is another idea from Vickie Fuquay of Danville, to keep ants out of your nestboxes: Place a couple of dried bay leaves under all nest cups .

Last year I had a nest box occupied by wrens whose eggs had just hatched; the box was full of ants. There was no way to reconstruct a wren nest so I stuck 5 bay leaves in among the sticks under the nest. Next day all the ants were gone and all 6 wren babies fledged successfully. This spring I added bay leaves under each cup when I did my spring rounds before nesting began, The nestboxes on my watch are still ant free.

A Tribute to Harry Pruitt

By Vickie Fuquay

On November 4th, 2011 we lost our Bluebird box builder and local Bluebird man, Harry Pruitt. I met Harry several years ago. He arrived with a Bluebird house in tow. He wanted to know if I would sell his houses for him. I gave him my specs and a week later Harry arrived with exactly what I asked for; I told him we were in business.

Harry built over 700 houses in his retirement years, and provided houses for both Adopt-A-Box and VBS grant houses in Southside VA. Over 200 of his houses were placed on public land in Pittsylvania County in areas that ranged from school grounds to walking trails and parks.

For several years I had asked about putting up a house at our local branch library here in Danville VA. Getting approval took some doing but finally I was told YES!

In late February, I installed the house at the library in memory of Harry Pruitt. The first egg laid in Danville was on March 8th in this house. By the time this nesting season ended, Mama Blue had produced 3 nest attempts, 14 eggs, 14 babies and 14 fledged! I know Harry Pruitt is smiling down knowing this was the most successful house on my trail!



Trouble In The Park

By Cathy Hindman

Prince William County has numerous public parks with nesting boxes enjoying much success with Bluebirds, Tree Swallows and Chickadees. Only Veteran's Park on the Potomac River has had trouble this season. This park is within walking distance of several neighborhoods and businesses, has league softball, a swimming pool, playgrounds and a big skate park. In 2012 there have been nesting box poles knocked down on the ground, a roof torn off a box, and Noel guards crushed - preventing the babies from getting their feedings. The Park Authority has been cooperating with our monitors; their personnel began looking out for foul play and began informing people around the area of what was going on.

There has been some success this year but many boxes have had dead babies. At the end of July, whole clutches, including the mother bird, have been found dead in the box. Why or who is doing this is still a mystery. Nancy believes that the last dead families were poisoned. Poisoning is a dreadful conclusion and one that is particularly disturbing.

Nancy and Yale Schiffman have been faithful monitors for over five years at Veteran's Park. They walk the park once a week, recording all the activity, and keep up with repairing damaged poles and boxes. This year, after much angst over the vandalism, they have decided to call it quits at this park. The boxes were removed after the last baby fledged. Because of Nancy and Yale's diligence, they have found a new place perfect for the nesting trail. With the help of Boy Scouts and one Eagle Scout candidate, Locust Shade Park will receive a Bluebird trail. This park has a perfect setting with a pond, fields and good tree and shrub cover. The public activity at this park consists of family picnics, softball, a driving range and a small outdoor theater. It is away from residences and accessible only by car. It is important to know the park and surrounding neighborhoods when establishing a trail. Nancy and Yale have done their homework in talking to the Park Authority and the scouts to make this new project a successful birding trail like Veteran's Park was some years ago.

Bluebird Monitor Wins Third In Local Master Naturalist Photo Contest

Tommy Ngo, a Certified Master Naturalist in the Northern Neck Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists and Bluebird monitor at Barnesfield Park in King George, captured third place in the Fauna category with his photo of Bluebird babies in their nest. See photo at right. Along with the photos of other entrants and winners in both Flora and Fauna, Tommy's photo is being displayed at the Ice Cream Shop (next to the Kinsale Museum) in Kinsale, VA until September 16th. September 15th is Kinsale Days.



Nest Cams At School!

By Vickie Fuquay

As the end of summer brings students and teachers back to school, why not consider a citizen science project by including a nature camera on school grounds?

VBS is providing grant funds for a nest cam, nest box and predator guards in order to promote bluebird conservation in public schools in Virginia. Interested teachers can write a letter describing their conservation efforts and ideas on how the nest cam will be best utilized in the classroom. It's so easy!

After applying for the VBS grant, I received the nest cam and box within a week, ready to be installed on school grounds. Imagine students and teachers observing bluebirds and other cavity nesting birds when they are unable to be in the "field." From an exciting perspective, the nest cam supports the integration of all subjects especially math, language arts and (citizen) science.

Citizen science is a way for students and teachers to learn about birds, science and conservation. Everyone watching bluebirds can help researchers better understand bird populations and their habitats. There are many citizen science project opportunities available. Get your class involved!

To submit your application or get more information contact Vickie Fuquay at vickiefuquay@comcast.net



Remembering VBS Volunteer Don Larrick

By Kathleen Britts

The monitoring team for the Hemlock Overlook Bluebird Trail in Clifton, Va., have recognized the dedicated service of Don Larrick with a special nest box. A longtime bluebird trail monitor and VBS member, Don passed away earlier this year.

The box, which was installed in July, was constructed by Paul Davis, VBS board member and Nelson County Coordinator. It is made from black cherry coated with linseed oil. A bronze memorial plaque was placed on the box to commemorate Don's many years of volunteer work.

Don was an inspiration to all who knew him. He lovingly cared for the nest boxes, often making much-needed repairs and handling difficult situations with skills learned from his many years of monitoring experience. He continued to walk the trail until his illness made the activity too painful for him.

Don will be remembered for his unwavering devotion and generous nature. From his fellow monitors at Hemlock Overlook ...

Jen Connors, Kristy Liercke, and Diana Davis

"Thank you, Don."



This beautiful box has found a home

With hopes that Bluebirds come.

And raise their chicks in memory of

Their longtime friend, now gone.



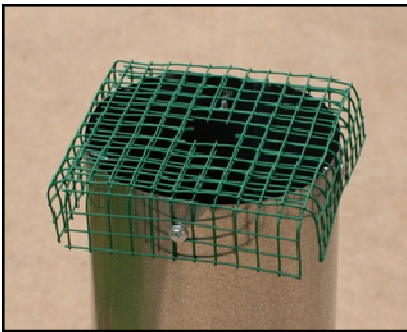
“Reconnecting With Nature” Project In Orange

The Old Rag Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists has created a new project called Reconnecting with Nature at Dogwood Village, an elder care non-profit facility in Orange, VA. The center has assisted living and long-term care sections serving a total of about 235 people. The goal of Reconnecting with Nature is to share our joy of nature by developing partnerships with regional elder care facilities in order to enhance their residents’ quality of life. Our efforts bring members of the ORMN chapter together to offer personal knowledge of nature in a variety of ways, including presentations, demonstrations, video and photographic slideshows, nature walks, bird watching events, small group programs, and assistance with healing gardens.

As a part of this project, bluebird nesting boxes have been installed by VBS members of the ORMN chapter in newly created gardens and habitats around the village. The five boxes were specially designed to accommodate seniors.

[1] Screwdrivers are not required to open the entry door, and

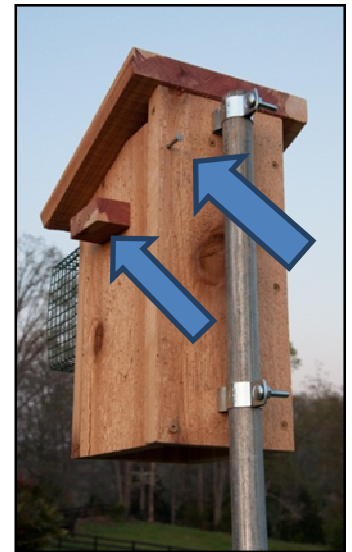
[2] there is a grip on the side to make it easier to pull the door open. The boxes were installed slightly lower on the pole so that residents can peer inside without stepping on a stool.



Another adjustment was the replacement of the stovepipe cap with hardware cloth to prevent wasps from creating nests inside the baffle. The boxes are monitored by residents assisted by Dogwood Village staff and overseen by ORMN/VBS members.

Despite being installed later in the season, one of the boxes had a clutch of bluebirds this summer. The residents and the Master Naturalists are so excited to see that the birds have already determined

the property to be a friendly place. One of the Dogwood Village staff members, Ashley Gore secured a device that will allow wheelchair-bound residents, such as Isabelle Dotson to see inside the box. [Ashley Gore, standing, and Isabelle Dotson, seated in wheel chair, are shown below]



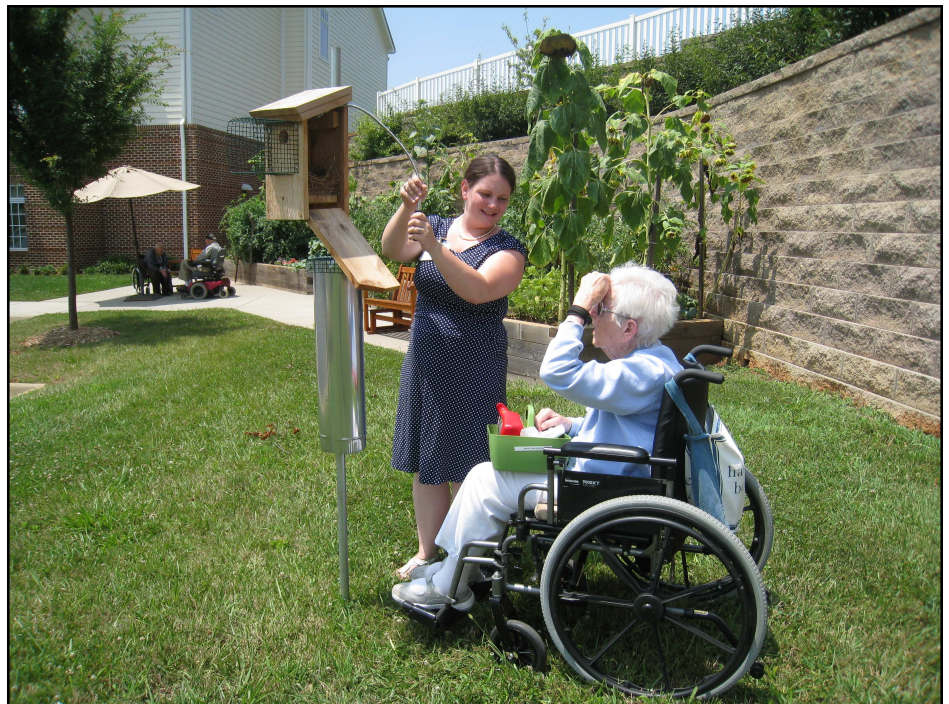
The Old Rag Master Naturalists are excited about this new project and are hopeful that other chapters in Virginia will create similar programs in their own areas.

Article and photo by:

Julie Connelly, ORMN, project coordinator

Dana Squire, ORMN and VBS member

Roger and Pat Temples, ORMN and VBS members



Calendar

If you haven't already done so, please submit your data to your county coordinator or Charlie Chambers at ce.chambers@verizon.net

VBS Board Meeting: November 3, 10:30am, Nellysford; members welcome, RSVP to Carmen at cjbish@aol.com

Virginia Beach Winter Wildlife Festival, January 25-27,
<http://www.vbgov.com/government/departments/parks-recreation/special-events/Pages/winter-wildlife-festival.aspx>

The Answer Lady Fall 2012

Question: Dear Answer Lady,

When is the best time to put up a nestbox or a new Bluebird trail? I have heard so many different theories that I am mightily confused.

Answer: Dear Member,

I can't blame you. That is because there is no really pat answer to that question. And the answer depends on where you live on this continent. Here in Virginia, where our Bluebirds and other cavity nesters do not migrate fall and spring, my answer would be to place that new nestbox Now!

You could put that nestbox up during the nesting season (March through July) and find it occupied in just a few days. I have often heard monitors tell me that they put up a new box and walk away and when they look back, there is a Bluebird perched on the box! Conversely, I have often thought that I had found the perfect location for a nestbox and it is never occupied. It is something only the Bluebird will decide!

Another good time to add a nestbox or new trail would be after all the new birds have fledged and they are flying around in family groups and mixed flocks in the late summer and fall or even during the winter months. These Bluebirds are regularly inspecting the boxes for the "right" place to nest. So it is wise to have those nestboxes up. By February the choices seem to be made.

The nestbox builder often feels that it is best to put the new boxes up in the spring so that they don't weather so badly over the winter. But my feeling is that these boxes are necessary much earlier to be part of the cavity seeking route these birds follow during their inspections. However, if you are replacing an old box with a new one, then that could wait until spring, because there is a nestbox there in place no matter its condition. Young birds, especially, spend a lot of time inspecting these boxes. The older, adult birds, will have already decided where they will be nesting next season. If the adults had successfully fledged their young at a particular box they will return to that box. The young birds need to find a box that has not already been taken!

And finally, cavity nesters and especially Bluebirds, use the nestbox to roost in on cold nights and stormy days during the winter months. So, if you put up a new trail or add to an existing trail before then, they will appreciate the space for being able to get out of the cold. Several birds will go into a given box and together their body heat keeps them all safer and warmer. This is one reason we often winterize our Virginia boxes in the fall. They will have more ventilation than the more northern boxes have and those ventilation slots will need closing in order to keep our box warmer for these winter roosters.

So, if you are wondering, don't any more. Just put up the nextbox in your yard or on a new trail, NOW. Time's a wasting!

How To Join

Send your name, address, phone number and/or email address along with a check for \$10 for an individual or \$15 for a family to:

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

Membership forms are available on the VBS website:
www.virginiabluebirds.org

VBS Store on CafePress

Just in time for the holiday season - VBS now has a store on CafePress where you can purchase apparel and other items with the VBS logo. The proceeds support VBS, and when you wear your shirt or hat, or carry your water bottle or tote bag, you show your endorsement of bluebird conservation. Check it out at <http://www.cafepress.com/virginiabluebirdsociety>. Also, a link from the VBS website (www.virginiabluebirds.org) should be available by the time you receive this newsletter. If you have suggestions for the store, please contact Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com. Happy shopping!

Bats In The Boxes

Has anyone ever had bats using their Bluebird nestboxes?

If so, please email Nicole at Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy (nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org)



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