

The Bird Box Bird Box

Fall 2014 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

A Home With an Escape Hatch

Article and photo by Brion Patterson



Sometimes you have to think outside of the box. Folks are trying a new design for the bluebird box in order to help bluebirds compete with HOSPs (house sparrows). HOSPs take over bluebird houses and even kill bluebirds. HOSPs are usually found in more urban areas, and are attracted to birdfeeders filled with “mixed seed” instead of pure sunflower seeds. HOSPs are not native to the USA. They will build nests in boxes intended for bluebirds. They sometimes attack a female bluebird, especially while she is in the nest box, incubating her eggs. The HOSP will

actually get on top of the incubating female and peck her head until she’s dead.

So let us give the bluebird an “escape hatch” with a re-designed bluebird box that has TWO openings! Simply drilling a second hole in a standard bluebird box, won’t work. The box must be enlarged. Linda Violet, who has used it successfully since 1998 with Western Bluebirds in California, has pioneered a “two-holer Mansion” design. As Linda says, “Two-holed boxes are not technically House Sparrow resistant. They are nestboxes that bluebirds can defend against House Sparrows. The success of the design is based on bluebirds escaping from a box under attack and outcompeting HOSPs by taking the battle outside the box where bluebirds have the advantage.” In Southwest Virginia, Christine Boran has run a test with Eastern Bluebirds. Christine is VBS State Coordinator. She put the “two-holer” to the test, installing it in an urban location with a history of HOSPs. The bluebirds have now re-captured that territory. Christine says, “I have been using it 5 years straight where HOSPs are, with 100 percent success.” At Mountain Run Lake Park in Culpeper, VA, we also had HOSP nests appearing in some of our boxes, and found dead adult bluebirds in the boxes, with their heads destroyed. Susan Kitts, a trail monitor, read about the “two-holer,” and got her husband, Rich, to build one based on Linda’s plans at <http://www.nestboxbuilder.com/pdf/Violet2hm.pdf>. In 2014 our “two-holer” had two successful bluebird broods, no HOSP nests, and no murdered bluebirds!

“Two-holer” nestboxes are still being tested and debated. Stay tuned and try it cautiously.

The Bird Box Inside this Issue

Item	Page
Meet the Monitor	2
Meet the Monitor	3
Protecting Nestboxes	4
Celebrating a Pioneer	5
Some Thoughts	6
Cavity Nester	7
It Takes a Village	7
How to Join	8

Meet the Monitors!

Article by Christina Woodson

Photos by Stephanie Schmuck and Christina Woodson

On a warm afternoon in July I had the pleasure of spending time with Girl Scout Troop 1036 in their gorgeous and expansive native plant garden, which is lovingly tended by Stephanie and several other parents. Stephanie is an outstanding environmental educator who generously shares her knowledge and love of nature with the school community at large and especially with the next generation of aspiring young Bluebirders!

CW: How did you begin monitoring Bluebird trails?

STEPHANIE: I began monitoring trails with the Master Naturalists at Newport News Park. It was always so exciting to see the eggs and babies. While running at the York County Sports Complex I had the idea of starting a trail there since it's a perfect habitat for bluebirds. That trail did really well. A week after we installed it one box already had a nest! Around that time, Dr. Karen Grass, the principal at my daughters' school, was retiring. Since she had always wanted the school to have a nature trail, we decided this would be a perfect time to install a Bluebird trail in her honor. We had developed a habitat for wildlife and had observed bluebirds on the school property during the Great Backyard Bird Count, so it all came together perfectly!

CW: What is special to you about your trail?

HELEN: All the birds that are around here will have an opportunity to have a new home and a place to raise their children.

STEPHANIE: Not only did the Girl Scouts, some of whom attend the school, install the trail but also it is available for all the students in the school, and it's going to be a great learning opportunity for them.

SARAH: Dr. Grass always wanted a nature trail so we put in a Bluebird trail for her since she just retired.

EMMA: It's one of the last things we did to get our Journey patch. All the things were about nature; we made some nests, too.



LEXI: A bird was starting to build a nest in my box and then a bird was starting to push it out (that's all!).

MARION: I was excited the day I got to check the box I put up and then when I found the babies inside it was a dream come true!

ALEXANDRIA: Caring about them, feeding them and loving them...

CW: What would you like to share about Bluebirds and other cavity nesters?

STEPHANIE: It is so interesting to see even within the bluebird community the range of nest-building styles- some make very tidy nests and others are all over the place! I found one nest filled with Black Cherry pits.

It's always exciting to see other species too. For example, on my other trail I observed tree frogs in one box. I love the comfy nests of the Carolina Chickadee and the way they hide the eggs under layers of soft material. Probably my favorite thing is that it forces you to slow down and observe things along the trail other than just the magic that is happening in the nest box.

SARAH: It's really exciting when you see the bluebird babies. When you see a bluebird, it makes you think about your family.

HELEN: I am happy to have homes for the birds!



Protecting our Nestboxes – Some Thoroughly Researched Ideas

Research and photos by Christine Boran

Article Edited by Doug Rogers, Editor

Christine Boran, VBS State Coordinator, has done extensive research on protecting bluebird nestboxes from predators of all kinds. Christine monitors a trail of 36 bluebird nestboxes in Southern Virginia's Patrick County. Based on her research in preventing bluebird predation over the last five nesting seasons, she recommends the following: (Please note that these recommendations are not currently part of the official VBS protocol.)

Blow Fly Protection:

Use Food-Grade Diatomaceous Earth (DE) to eradicate blowfly larvae inside nests. The DE should be puffed on the bottom of the box and inside the nesting material about an inch below the egg cup. It should never be applied after the eggs hatch. Hardware cloth risers were found to be ineffective in deterring the blowfly from reaching the hatchlings. For a reference on the use of Food-Grade DE, refer to the website of Harry Schneider, President of the Bluebird Society of PA:

<http://www.ambassadorforthebluebirds.net/lets-talk-bluebirds/parasitic-and-blowfly-larva-solution>

See photos at right. DE is being applied under the nest and in the nesting material. Please note that care should be taken to avoid inhaling DE, as there is a *possibility* that it could cause lung irritation to humans.



Based on Christine's research, lung irritation from Food Grade DE to either humans or bluebirds has not been a problem. DE is not a pesticide, not a chemical. But it works!!

Black Rat Snake and Other Land-Based Predator Protection:

8" width stovepipe guards were found to be far more effective in deterring black rat snakes. Christine's boxes experienced snake predation when protected with the 6" stovepipe guards and no snake predation with the 8" stovepipe guards.

The hardware cloth used in making Noel Guards should be cut so as to leave the sharp "prongs" exposed at the outer ends. These "prongs" should be bent away from the opening of the Noel Guard - see photo attached. This method was shown to also be effective in deterring black rat snakes and all other land-based predators that made it past all other guards. See link below:

<http://nestwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/guardnoe.pdf>

See photo at right with "prongs" exposed and an 8" stovepipe guard. Note that the stovepipe guard is high on the pole, which deters predators more effectively.



Celebrating a Pioneer in Bluebird Conservation

Dottie Haley

Mr. Jimmy Doyle has been an advocate for the local bluebird population for the last 36 years and has served as acting County Coordinator in Henry County for most of those years. Mr. Doyle's efforts have made a significant impact in our bluebird population here in Henry County. He has erected and monitored nest boxes all around the area, taught other people how to take care of the bluebirds and made many friends along the way. Exactly how many bluebirds has Jimmy Doyle personally helped fledge? Let's make a conservative estimate - Jimmy has monitored at least 25 nest boxes for the last 36 years. If each of those boxes only had five bluebirds fledge each year that would be a total of 4,500 bluebirds. Again, that is a conservative estimate.

Mr. Doyle was honored on December 27, 2013 at Chatmoss Country Club. Two honorary bluebird boxes were planted there with tags that read "In Honor of Bluebird Man Jimmy Doyle." Several of his long time bluebird associates, family members and fellow VBS members were present to witness Jimmy receiving a certificate of appreciation for his years of dedicated and faithful service. He was also presented a bluebird coffee mug and handcrafted bluebird Christmas tree ornament to serve as reminders of his special day. Everyone expressed their appreciation for the knowledge he has shared over the years. Thank you Jimmy Doyle for making an impact and for introducing me to the world of bluebirds. You are truly a pioneer.



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artwork (photos and drawings) for *The
Bird Box!*
E-mail your materials to Doug Rogers.

Some Thoughts on the Bluebird

Max Czapaznskiy, Avian Research Assistant

I still remember my surprise finding bluebirds among the thrushes in my Sibley's. Surely that couldn't be right. Bluebirds share so few superficial similarities with the other members of their family. Counterintuitive it may be, but the *Sialia* genus (bluebirds) does indeed belong to the same family as what I think of as 'typical' thrushes in the genus *Catharus*: Veery, Hermit Thrush, Bicknell's Thrush, et al.

The disparate characteristics of bluebirds and other thrushes is an excellent example of divergent evolution, wherein a single lineage splits into new and different taxa. Almost every other thrush is cryptically colored and forages in leaf litter. Most are talented singers - think of the Hermit Thrush's ethereal, spiraling song. Bluebirds are not only brightly colored, they're notoriously conspicuous as well. How many times have you seen one perched on a fence post for all the world to see? This summer, while working in the Missouri River Breaks, I couldn't walk past a pine stand without finding a family of Mountain Bluebirds in a snag. And not to take a cheap shot, but their songs aren't anything to write home about. Much like the Yellow-breasted Chat among Wood Warblers, bluebirds bear little resemblance to their family members.

In their foraging habits bluebirds are, again, dissimilar from the other thrushes. In a case of convergent evolution, they behave more like the distantly related flycatchers. Thrushes are oscines - they have complex voice boxes and, in general, learn their songs. The suboscines (flycatchers, kingbirds, and phoebes) have simpler voice boxes and often their songs are innate. The two suborders diverged long ago, but in the ages since, both bluebirds and flycatchers have devised the same tactics for acquiring food. Convergent evolution is the same phenomenon that granted penguins and alcids (auklets, puffins, murrets, and guillemots) so many shared features. Diving seabirds both, with predominantly black and white plumage, separated by miles of tropical waters and eons of evolution.

When we pick up our binoculars we turn our backyards into art galleries and concert halls; this is the heart and soul of the joy of birding. Not only does it connect us to nature, but through careful observation it also reveals ancient relationships within nature. The unlikely link between bluebirds and other thrushes is one such example, as is their superficial similarity to the flycatchers. These phenomena were thousands upon thousands of years in the making and we get the chance to appreciate them every time we watch a flash of blue diving from a fence post.

Hosting a Unique Cavity Nester

Article and Photo by Earl Morris

During the first week this past April I had the good fortune of spotting a pair of small birds leaving a nest box at one of our bluebird trails here in Roanoke County. The box was located among a small stand of bull pine trees along a golf course fairway. In the box I found a few bark strips and watching me from above were two brown-headed nuthatches. Before moving on I installed a plate that reduced the entrance hole to one-inch in hopes of discouraging a bluebird or tree swallow from using the nest site.

On my rounds the following week I found a completed nest of bark strips and lined with pine seed husks. And one week later there were six eggs. All hatched near the end of April, and by mid-May the nestlings had successfully fledged. I understand that this is the first documented nesting of brown-headed nuthatches here in the Roanoke County area.



Around this golf course there are several small stands of bull pine trees where I have noticed several nuthatches in the past. Brown-headed nuthatches seem to depend on old growth pine stands and tend to run up and down the trunks. Showing up here in southwestern Virginia puts them outside their usual year-round range. Before next season I plan to add inch hole spacers to several other nest boxes near the stands of bull pines.

Further information on the plight and research of this declining species can be found on our VBS website under "[Other Cavity Nesters.](#)"

It Takes a Village

Brion Patterson

There was one bluebird house still active at Culpeper's Mountain Run Park. As trail monitor Janet Furlong made her way across the wet park Saturday morning August 23, 2014 she was pretty sure even #6 would be empty today. After all, the three chicks in box #6 had hatched nearly three weeks earlier. Surprisingly, one very mature fledgling was still in the nest. The bird tried to fly out but could not. Cecile said, "We took the nest out in one hand and held the bird with the other." Brion said he thought something was holding the bird to the nest. After closer examination we saw that the nest had fishing line in it, which had twisted around the baby's leg. She was literally tied to the nest. We used the scissors of a Swiss Army knife to cut away the fishing line. We held our breath as Brion let the baby go. She fluttered a couple of feet along the ground and then soared up. At that instant, mom bluebird swooped in from the left and dad flew in from the right and together escorted the fledgling to a branch on the pine tree. It was beautiful to behold. Clearly the chick had not been abandoned! It really does take a village to raise a family! And constant trail monitoring can save a life.

Mark Your Calendar

If you haven't already done so, please submit your trail data to your county coordinator or, if you don't have a county coordinator, to **Ann Dunn at add7k@virginia.edu**

State Fair of Virginia, Sept. 26 - October 5, Doswell; VBS will be at the Fair on October 3, 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Eastern Shore Birding and Wildlife Festival, October 10 - 12, Cape Charles, www.esbirdingfestival.com

VBS Board Meeting, October 18, 10:00 a.m., Charlottesville; Members Welcome, RSVP to Carmen Bishop at cjbish@aol.com. The meeting will be held in the Ivy Creek Natural Area's Education Building.

How To Join

Send your name, address, phone number and/or email address along with a check for \$10 for an individual with e-mailed Newsletter (\$15 for print Newsletter) or \$15 for a family with e-mailed Newsletter (\$20 for a print Newsletter) to:

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



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