

The Bird Box

Fall 2016 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.virginiabluebirds.org

More Than Just Numbers

Understanding Bird Behavior For Conservation



By Ashley Peele, PhD, Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas Coordinator

The Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS) and a new project, the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA2) share an important goal, documenting bird behavior. Bird conservation and monitoring isn't always just about numbers, but rather noting what birds are up to, especially in the breeding season.



Eastern Bluebirds capture the eye and imagination of many people, from many walks of life. They are with us year-round, in the bright months of spring and summer through the cold months of winter.

Perhaps it is their constancy that draws so many to this species, the anticipation of bright blue and orange feathers in the midst of winter's browns and greys. Whatever the reason, this appreciation led to an early awareness of the decline of bluebirds from the eastern landscape and a united effort to do something about it.

This decline in a previously widespread species awakened us to changes in our local habitats, i.e. the loss of natural cavities that limited this species' breeding habitat. Similarly, population shifts across multiple species of birds signal broader changes at the ecosystem level. Just as the VBS unites bluebird lovers in an effort to conserve and protect this species, so does the VABBA2 hope to unite all bird lovers to gather data on distribution and breeding evidence of birds. Sponsored by the VA Dept. of Game and Inland Fishers, as well as the Virginia Society of Ornithology, this data will be used to better inform management and conservation strategies for bird species and the habitats crucial to their breeding success.

VBS volunteers are in a unique position given their experience of monitoring bluebird breeding activity. Many traditional birders devote most of their effort to identifying and counting birds, rather than documenting their behavior. However, as Bridget Stutchbury points out in 'Silence of the Songbirds', "we have to do more than add trees and nest sites..." We also have to observe and understand whether birds are actually breeding in the natural or man-made habitats that still exist in our landscapes. To that end, VBS volunteers need only extend their observations to other birds occupying their areas to make a huge contribution to the Atlas project.

In this first breeding season (March—September 2016), Atlas volunteers contributed nearly 14,000 checklists,

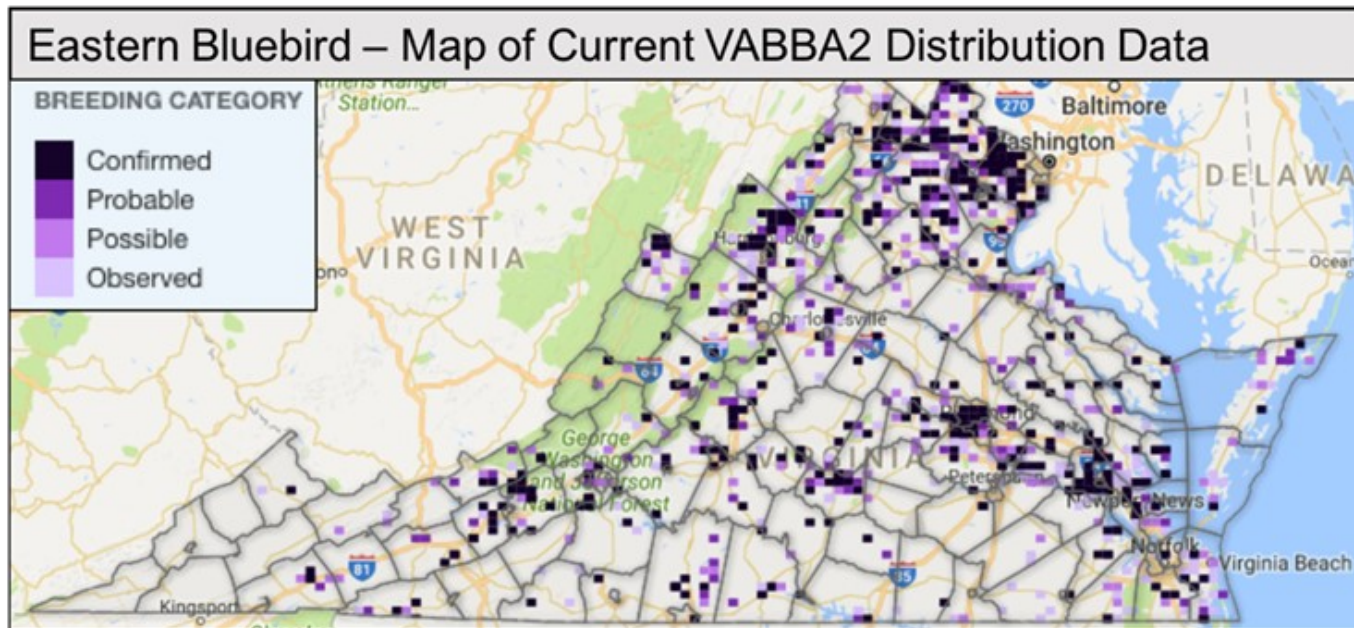
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amounting to 10,000+ hours of field observation time. They confirmed 174 species breeding somewhere in the state, and nearly 50% of Atlas Priority areas (aka 'blocks') received data. These are fantastic numbers for the first season and demonstrate the value of volunteer-driven data collection for wildlife research. However, the Atlas will continue to need more help in more parts of Virginia, if it is to reach the coverage needed for a true picture of Virginia's bird populations. Large areas of the state have received little data thus far and some species, including cavity-nesters, tend to be under-reported (see Map of Current Bluebird Reports).



The VABBA2 is a unique opportunity to use bluebird monitoring experience and expand your birding knowledge and conservation efforts. The VBS does fantastic conservation work in Virginia and we appreciate all the data we've already received from nest box monitors this year. Please check out the VABBA2 home page (vabba2.org) and eBird portal (ebird.org/atlasva) for more information about the project and how to get involved next spring.

Special Thanks

Thank you to **Exxon Mobil Foundation** for their generous support. We also wish to thank our sustaining and endowment members who support VBS:

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Bluebird Fledglings . . . Captured!

By Lynn Rafferty, Fairfax, Virginia

After many years of monitoring bluebird trails and our own nest boxes, I had yet to see babies actually fledge. So when this year's first clutch of six babies seemed about ready, I was determined to witness the event somehow. The box is only 15 feet from our kitchen window, so it's easy to track the comings and goings of the parents. We knew, by the increasing frequency of feedings, that the time was getting close. I had a free day on Monday, so in the morning I set my camera on a tripod and had it shoot a photo every ten seconds. A good plan, but that's a lot of photos to sort through. I changed the memory card and battery every couple of hours and sorted through the photos with my laptop on the kitchen counter, while simultaneously monitoring the activity outside the window.

That first morning, it was just the parents coming and going. As the day progressed I began to see the babies peeking out more frequently and showing a bit more of their faces. I let the camera continue to take photos until it was too dark for my lens (a Nikon 55-300 mm 4.5 - 5.6 mounted to a Nikon D5300). However, during the ten hours, I had accumulated over 3000 photos. There were long periods of up to thirty minutes when there appeared to be no activity at all. Feedings often last just a few seconds or a parent quickly disappears into the nest box and flies out just as quickly, so many feedings were missed altogether. Having already decided that this would be a time lapse movie, I began deleting photos of the inactive periods and just left a single inactive frame both before and after the active photos of parents or babies.



The second day, I was up before dawn, but the bluebird parents were already hard at work. I noticed that when the parents are bringing food, they seem to spend a lot of time perched on nearby branches before going to the box. Often the other parent would alight nearby, then the first would go to the box. A few times the parents perched nearby, possibly anticipating that a baby was ready to fledge, or perhaps they were hunting, I don't know which. I also noted a murmuring sound that the parents made when perched nearby. I have heard the parents continue to make the same sound in the yard since the babies fledged.

There are feeders quite near our bluebird box, so there were often other birds in the vicinity. A cardinal landed on top of the nest box once, but a young house finch was the only bird who was chased off by the parents.

The video shows the first baby fledging at 9:58 a.m. It was simply luck that the camera caught that fraction-of-a-second event. The bird had been poking its head out just a bit, but suddenly out it came and flew right off. No dilly-dallying for that one. There were six babies altogether and I only saw two fledge. When I saw the other one emerge, there was quite a bit of activity beforehand. It had been anticipating feedings with open mouth at the nest hole and poking more and more of its head out and looking around more frequently. With those warning signs, I was able to go out grab the camera and take a series of photos myself. The bird definitely had doubts about taking off once it was outside the nest hole. He seemed to feel that it was all some terrible mistake and that he wanted back inside. Inside of 8-10 seconds, maybe less, he realized that there was no going home again and off he went. His first flight was a clumsy 15 foot arc up to a nearby branch and I soon lost sight of him. The camera didn't catch any more babies emerging, but in those photos at least one baby can still be seen inside the box with its mouth wide open.



I spent two entire days in the effort to see the babies fledge and another three sorting through the photos and creating the time lapse video. Was it worth it? Absolutely. I not only achieved my goal of seeing the birds fledge, but I've also had the pleasure of sharing the experience through the time lapse video.

To see the three-minute time-lapse video, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmRx7Wlv0QA>

School Nest Cam Program is Growing

Virginia Bluebird Society Grants

By Vickie Fuquay, State Coordinator of School Nest Cam Grants

In the fall of 2011, we launched our nest-cam programs with two custom camera boxes to watch live feed of bluebirds nesting. We installed one box at Grove Park Magnet School and one at Yorktown Elementary School as a pilot to test the boxes and cameras.

I shipped out the first box with the camera in July of 2012 to Warrenton, VA. It was a slow go trying to get the word out to teachers, but as of this publication, we currently have 42 boxes across the state. I love hearing from teachers and students about their experience with the box. In fact, I was recently handed a bright purple folder containing 71 hand written letters from the 5th graders at Stony Mill Elementary expressing their gratitude to VBS. I cried tears of joy to finally realize the impact that the nest cams were having on the children.

In today's society where iPads, smartphones, and computer games are the norm for our youth, I am very proud to be a part of VBS connecting technology with nature and getting young people involved. Our generation was responsible for building successful bluebirds trails, and with careful monitoring we have brought back our beautiful bluebirds. It is imperative that we instill the love of nature in our youth to maintain the trails we have established.

My garage is still the shipping department and my husband stands ready to box up and ship out the next camera box to your school. <http://www.virginiabluebirds.org/about-vbs/grant-programs/> Fill out the application on line and email it in to me. The grant covers the nest box, camera, cable, and predator guards. At our last board meeting we voted to allow the nest cams to be used by facilities other than schools as long as it is used for educational purposes. Public libraries, museums, and welcome centers all may be eligible if the habitat would be good for our bluebirds. For more information contact me at vickiefuquay@comcast.net

This map of Virginia shows the locations of all 42 nest cams. The areas with many camera boxes usually had a county coordinator involved to spread the word. If you do not see a nest box near your location contact VBS to see how you can apply for a grant for your area schools.



● Denotes bluebird nest cam box

Bluebird Box at the Montessori School of Charlottesville

By Deana Sackett

In April, they came. We had spent February and March preparing for their arrival. The families of our Montessori School had gathered together to help install on our playground the bluebird nesting box given to us by the Virginia Bluebird Society. We had found a perfect spot in the grass, near the dogwood tree. We could even see the box from our classroom windows!

We prepared ourselves as well! We learned all about bluebirds; what they like to eat, how they build their nests, what their eggs and chicks look like and how they are in need our help. We read books that taught us that the bluebird are in trouble. The land that used to be fields and meadows where the bluebirds like to hunt for insects were being turned into buildings and houses. Also, people use chemicals to kill the insects that the bluebirds love to eat! To make matters worse, there is a nonnative bird who likes to steal their nests and hurt their chicks. Luckily, there are things that we can do to help, like putting up our bluebird box! But bluebirds weren't the only birds who might come visit us! Other cavity nesters like chickadees, wrens, the tufted titmouse and tree swallows may want to raise their chicks in our bluebird box. We learned about them from our books too. There were many giggles when we found out that the tufted titmouse could stealthily steal fur for it's nest from sleeping dogs! But in April, they came. Not the bluebirds we had been hoping for, but a chickadee pair. We watched on the monitor as they built their nest from soft moss and grass. And then we saw the eggs, one at a time, each day until there were six! It was hard to imagine they were so tiny, because they looked so big on the monitor. It was hard waiting for the eggs to hatch. Each day we checked on them, and checked on them, until one afternoon we had a big surprise!



An egg started to crack.....



.....and then a chickadee chick came out of the shell.

Not all the eggs hatched and not all the chicks survived, but that is the way of nature. Over the next couple of weeks, we watched the chickadee parents care for the chicks. The chicks opened their beaks so wide each time the parents came to feed them, and they grew. They grew feathers and started to look like the adult chickadees with their black and white feathers. They became so big, they could barely fit in the nest! On the last day of school, we said "goodbye" to our kindergarten friends who were moving on to new schools and to those going away for the summer. The next day the chickadee chicks flew away too, leaving the teachers with empty classrooms waiting to be filled with children and a nesting box ready and awaiting new chicks in the spring.

Thank you to the Virginia Bluebird Society for this amazing experience from the teachers, families and children of the Montessori School of Charlottesville. We look forward to the spring!

House Sparrow Swap-Out

By Brion Patterson, Rappahannock County Coordinator, and Susan Kitts, Culpeper County Coordinator

House sparrows (HOSP) are a deadly danger to our beloved bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds. Bluebird monitors have been concerned about HOSP predation for several years at our 12-nestbox bluebird trail located at Mountain Run Lake Park in Culpeper County. We have seen eggs destroyed and removed, as well as adult birds decapitated or pecked to death by HOSP. Female bluebirds and tree swallows have been killed while they are in the nestbox, incubating eggs. In one case, a dead baby tree swallow was found in the noel guard and a HOSP was sitting on top of the box.

Up until the 2016 season, we had been attempting to control the HOSP by simply removing their nests/eggs as soon as we saw them. In seasons 2013, 2014, and 2015, we removed 8, 6, and 9 HOSP nests, respectively, from nestboxes in the park. This did not seem to deter the HOSP; in fact, it seemed that our removing the nests only ENCOURAGED the HOSP to commit more violence against the other birds.

While we know that HOSP nests, eggs, and young adults are not protected by Federal law, we cannot bring ourselves to kill the adults or babies (although we have no problem with destroying the eggs). We also believe that we should try to protect our own native American species against the destructive, marauding HOSP invaders, which were introduced into the U.S. beginning in the latter half of the 19th century. (For a history of this questionable act(s), you can go to: <http://www.sialis.org/hosphistory.htm>. So... what to do? Prior to 2016, we had already tried the following:

- 1) A two-hole birdhouse, which allows an "escape" hole for an adult bluebird. It seemed to help in that one location.
- 2) Pairing two boxes together, with arguable results.
- 3) Freezing any HOSP eggs, 2 or 3 and a time, so as to render them nonviable, and placing them back in the nest until we thought they had been abandoned. This was a plain old hassle because it entailed someone going out to the park several more times to take, freeze, and swap the eggs.

This year, we may have found another defense: the SWAP-OUT!

In 2016, we decided to participate in the Sparrow Swap, sponsored by the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. As part of the program, they provided us with fake HOSP eggs to swap out with real HOSP eggs as soon as the complete clutch had been laid. The fake wooden eggs were the shape and size of HOSP eggs, and had been skillfully painted by the Sparrow Swap volunteers to look exactly like real HOSP eggs. It was apparently a SUCCESS! This season, we had NO cases of evident HOSP-related disappearing eggs, destroyed eggs, or murdered bluebirds, tree swallows, or any other birds. In fact, there were only 4 HOSP nests built, and in only 1 box.

Our theory is that we kept the HOSP busy by swapping out their eggs for the fake ones. We were able to tell if they were still sitting on the nests each week by checking to see if the eggs were still warm, by photographing the nests to monitor changes, or by placing a small twig or leaf on the nest to see if it had been moved. Apparently, the HOSP are not easily able to discern between a fake egg and a real one!

The story remains unfinished, however. Hopefully, we will find out in future seasons whether this method of discouraging HOSP activity actually works.

For more information on the Sparrow Swap project, please visit:

<http://scistarter.com/project/1380-Sparrow%20Swap>

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Board of Directors

Cathy Hindman, President

(h) 703-590-0715

email: samhindman@verizon.net

Vickie Fuquay, Vice President

(h) 434-822-0930

email: vickiefuquay@comcast.net

Lexi Meadows, Vice President

(h) 434-251-4407

email: meadows9@fairpoint.net

Mary Lohman, Treasurer

(h) 704-994-9196

email: lmlohman@yahoo.com

Anne Little, Secretary

(h) 540-207-4298

email: thegate@cox.net

Ann Dunn, Data Manager

(h) 434-296-3496

email: add7k@virginia.edu

Paul Davis

(h) 434-361-0141

email: davis0138@aol.com

Earl Morris

(h) 540-776-1640

email: emorris@ntelos.net

Doug Rogers

(h) 434-973-7634

email: doug5996@gmail.com

Carmen Bishop, Past President

(h) 703-764-9628

email: cjbish@aol.com

Christine Boran, State Coordinator

(h) 276-930-9963

email: woolwinehouse@gmail.com

Judy Hall, The Bird Box Editor

(h) 804-790-0437

email: carjuwa@hotmail.com

We welcome your written items and art-
work (photos and drawings) for
The Bird Box!
Email your materials to Judy Hall.

Feeding Bluebirds in Winter by Vickie Fuquay

Last winter I cut branches from a holly, both deciduous and evergreen, and hung them together between two feeders on my deck. Mama Bluebird was there in a flash and stripped the berries in no time. They also ate my beautiful berry arrangement I placed by the front door for Christmas. Also, every year after Christmas we repurpose our fresh cut Christmas wreaths. We string a variety of berries, popcorn, peanuts in the shell, homemade suet balls tied up in netting and pinecones filled with the suet mixture. We also wire in holly branches and nandina berries. Bluebirds and other birds delight us as they feed from our old Christmas wreath hung out near our feeders! So get creative with your blues and enjoy feeding them all year long!



The Bluebird Advisor

By Anne Little



Dear Bluebird Advisor,

When should I winterize my nest boxes?

A bluebirder

Dear Bluebirder,

We winterize our nest boxes to give our bluebirds a warmer place to roost during the cold winter nights. The bluebird parents and their offspring from the current season's nesting will flock together through the winter and roost together for warmth. I usually start winterizing my boxes in September or October while the weather is still nice. I stuff foam in the open cracks and put either some dry grass or pine needles in the box to create more warmth. I usually remove this material in early March to prepare the box for the bluebirds' nesting season, but it does not hurt to leave the foam until late April to keep the box warm for the first nestlings. Prior to winterizing the box, you should clean out the old nesting material. If the box is very dirty, I sometimes spray with a mixture of vinegar and water to kill mites and other critters and clean out the box, but it is not necessary. After spraying I let the box dry and then go back and put in the grass when the box is dry. Keep an eye out for roosting birds entering the box at dusk – it is quite a thrill.

There is detailed information on our website about winterizing.

The Bluebird Advisor

Send your questions to vbs@virginiabluebirds.org

Annual Meeting of the Virginia Bluebird Society

When: Sat. Nov. 5th at 10:00 am

Where: Ivy Creek Natural Area, Education Building, Charlottesville, VA

Agenda: Reading of Minutes, Treasurer's Report, Old & New Business, Adjournment and Board Meeting to follow.

This 2016 annual meeting is open to members. Please RSVP to Cathy Hindman at samhindman@verizon.net so we can plan ahead for you. Our next all day Biennial Fall Conference will be in November 2017.

How To Join

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

Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg VA 22401

Membership forms are available on the VBS web site:

<http://www.virginiabluebirds.org>

Send An Article to The Bird Box

Send original articles, photos, or artwork or suggest a topic for a future newsletter. Submit materials to Judy Hall, Editor, at carjuwa@hotmail.com by January 30 to be considered for the winter newsletter, or May 30 for the summer newsletter.



Virginia Bluebird Society
726 William Street
Fredericksburg VA 22401