

The Bird Box

Fall 2017 Newsletter of the
Virginia Bluebird Society www.viriniabluebirds.org

Successful Mixed Species Nesting

By Margaret Wester

Project manager for Sky Meadows State Park Bluebird Trail

When one of our volunteer monitors reported one blue egg (Eastern Bluebird, or EABL) and six white eggs (Tree Swallows, or TRES) in a nest, we did not get too excited because this has happened before, and the bluebird egg never hatched. This was in nest box #79 of our 88 nest box bluebird trail at Sky Meadows State Park near Delaplane, Virginia, a project of the Shenandoah Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists.

But, two weeks later when the monitor reported four Tree Swallow hatchling and one Eastern Bluebird hatchling (2 unhatched swallow eggs), and sent a photo, we got very excited. I checked the nest box the very next day and confirmed this report (plus another swallow had hatched by that time) and took several photos clearly showing the larger bluebird hatchling with the smaller Tree Swallow hatchlings.



Larger Eastern Bluebird with smaller Tree Swallows

This nest box was then watched closely and more often as the chicks developed and feathers started to appear and open. Many questions came to mind, such as what might happen when the chicks fledge? Would the Tree Swallow parents tend the bluebird chick? Would the bluebird adapt and learn to hunt like a swallow?

Might it also attempt to migrate with

them? As it got closer to fledging time, I had to seek advice on this situation, so I contacted the North American Bluebird Society hotline. I got a response very soon with good advice. They said it would be highly unlikely the Tree Swallow adults could attend the Eastern Bluebird chick. Tree Swallow chicks are ready to fly as soon as they fledge due to their aerial hunting style, but bluebird chicks must have more time with adult bluebirds tending and feeding them as they develop their flying and drop-feed hunting skills. They suggested I should move the bluebird chick to another nesting box with bluebird chicks the same age.

So, the very next day, I studied the trail log books to find an appropriate Eastern Bluebird nest. I found two that had dates very close to the age of the chicks in box #79, but first I checked both of those boxes, and in one box the chicks looked older and more developed. The other nest box looked just right with four bluebird chicks at the same developmental stage as "Little Blue" (our new nickname for the bluebird chick in box 79 with the Tree Swallow chicks). I retrieved "Little Blue" from nest box #79 and transported him in a temporary nest made from a felt hat I had in my truck lined with grasses and a cloth to cover it to simulate the darkness inside a nest box. He remained very calm and still. I then put him in nest box #6 with the other bluebird chicks and he snuggled right in with them. The nest box



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Mixed species nestlings on 6/23/17. The bluebird is on the right.



Here are the chicks on 6/27/17, feathers opening, with the bluebird in front. He was moved the next day.

was then checked almost daily to assure all chicks were thriving. By July 5th, all the chicks had fledged. So, we can assume that “Little Blue,” the fostered chick, was accepted and tended by the parent Eastern Bluebirds with the others. On the next regular monitoring date (July 7) the swallow chicks in box #79 had also fledged.

Another interesting note to this story is that after the bluebird chicks in box #6 had fledged, I checked the box and found one unhatched bluebird egg. So, “little blue” made up for the chick that never hatched from that egg.

Here is the timeline for the mixed species nest:

6/2/17: mixed species eggs reported in nest box 79; first egg date estimated at 5/29/17

6/16/17: mixed species hatchlings reported, 4 TRES, 1 EABL

6/17/17: box checked again to confirm and found 5 TRES and 1 EABL hatchling (1 TRES egg remained unhatched)

6/23 through 6/27: nestlings developing and feathers opening; contacted NABS

6/28/17: transferred EABL chick from box #79 to box #6

6/29 through 7/1: all 5 EABL chicks in box #6 thriving

7/5/17: All 5 EABL chicks box #6 have fledged; one unhatched EABL from original clutch remains in nest

7/7/17: All 5 TRES chicks in box #79 have fledged

Many thanks to the NABS hotline for their swift and intelligent advice. All’s well that ends well!

Bluebird Monitors Team Up with Newly Formed Northern Virginia Purple Martin Initiative

By Michael Bishop

Program Coordinator, Northern Virginia Purple Martin Initiative

In July 2016, a new program to help bring back and bolster the numbers of the Purple Martin was formed. The Northern Virginia Purple Martin Initiative had a mission to evaluate favorable habitat, refurbish existing colonies if possible, and install housing in areas not previously inhabited by the birds.

For anyone not familiar with the Purple Martin, it is the only North American bird totally dependent on human-created housing for shelter and nesting. It is unknown how many hundreds of years ago this dependency started but it was first noted by colonists coming from Europe that Native Americans, including the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians, strung cleaned out gourds around their villages to attract the Martins. The birds were useful in chasing away Crows and other scavenging birds which prevented them from damaging the hides the Indians had put out to dry.



Plastic horizontal gourds such as these are used at all the sites. The martins seem to prefer them and they help guard against predators such as hawks and owls.

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Purple Martin Initiative, continued

Northern Virginia, specifically Fairfax County, was at one time rural with farms and pastures. Like many other similar areas, Purple Martin houses were part of that landscape. Now there are about 1.2 million people in the 400 square miles of the county, and the farms and the martins have disappeared. Many of the few martin houses that remain have gone into disrepair and neglect and serve as nesting sites for sparrows and starlings.

It was immediately recognized that for this program to work, it would take a cadre of trained volunteers to help monitor the colonies that were distributed in various locations. Our answer came in the form of Steve Johnson. Steve, the VBS Fairfax County Coordinator, was familiar with the location of several old Purple Martin colonies and put out the word to his army of bluebird monitors to help identify any such sites. As the reports came in, he also put me in touch with the individual bluebird monitors he thought might be interested in helping with this new program. After meeting with the monitors we began evaluating the sites and the existing housing and came up with a plan. In most cases the old housing was too damaged or inadequate to reuse. With increased research on the life and needs of the Purple Martin over the past couple of decades, more effective and efficient equipment has been produced and proven to enhance attraction and fledging of the birds.

The work began with the installation of a colony at a high school, two county parks, and two golf courses owned by the Fairfax County Park Authority. Immediately after installation, the sites at the high school, one county park and one golf course attracted martins. Two of the colonies were filled to capacity with nesting pairs. Each of the sites are maintained by volunteers that are trained in methods to attract the birds, protect them from predators and restore the colony after the nesting is over to a favorable condition to ready it for the next season. In addition, the caretakers can educate and enlighten the public on the habits and value of having Purple Martins.

The Initiative also participates in the conservation of other native cavity nesting birds. Projects included upgrading housing for several Eastern Bluebird trails, Wood Duck houses, Prothonotary Warbler houses and a Chimney Swift tower. As with the martin housing, all projects are provided at no cost on public land through donations, grants and the personal funds of the volunteers. In addition, free mentoring and advice is given to any individual wishing to start up or take over a Purple Martin colony. Many landowners have taken advantage of this and now have thriving colonies.

If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about the NOVA Purple Martin Initiative, please contact Mike Bishop, Program Coordinator at MWBishop@cox.net



The initial crew that installed the Burke Lake colony, Andy, Sheila, Alexis, and Paul



Bert Browning at Horner Park in Chesterfield

Chesterfield's Newest Bluebird Trail

By Bert Browning, Virginia Master Naturalist, Pocahontas Chapter

As a newly minted Pocahontas Chapter Virginia Master Naturalist in 2014, one of the first volunteer tasks I helped with at Pocahontas State Park in Chesterfield County was monitoring bluebird boxes. I found it to be both enjoyable and rewarding. Several months after the 2014 summer season, the Downing Ruritan Club of Midlothian, Virginia, was trying to decide what to do with several unused bluebird houses it had left over from a joint project with the Boy Scouts. The extra boxes had sat for several years in the safe confines of a club member's garage, and he was ready either to find a good use for them or simply discard them. I am a member of that club, but I was unaware of the unused boxes until the member mentioned his desire to dispose of them.

About the same time, Lee and Jane Hesler, who coordinate the bluebird box monitoring at Pocahontas State Park, were encouraging Master Naturalists to identify and develop additional bluebird house trails elsewhere in Chesterfield County. Horner Park is a still undeveloped county park,

located just off Genito Road adjacent to the Clover Hill Athletic Complex. It is not far from where I live, and it seemed to me it would make a great location for a new trail. Mark Battista, Naturalist with the Chesterfield County Department of Parks and Recreation, agreed to help me determine good locations for the boxes at the park. We soon found several excellent sites for the twelve boxes the Downing Ruritan Club was able to supply.

The actual placing of the boxes was a team effort, with a county staff member operating an auger and the Ruritan Club assisting in the installation. Lee Hesler improved the boxes by adding wire predator guards around the entry holes and stovepipe snake guards around the support poles. The boxes were not fully in place until well into the 2015 summer season, but a few of the boxes yielded bluebird and Carolina Chickadee nests, eggs, and fledglings before the season drew to a close.

The summer of 2016 yielded a doubling of the number of active nests and of fledglings. This year, all 12 boxes have hosted at least one active nest of bluebirds or chickadees, and it appears our number of fledglings will be close to double the numbers from 2016. Not bad for only the second full season!

This has been a real team effort: a local Ruritan club with unused bluebird boxes; a new Master Naturalist in search of a project; a county naturalist who could make the trail a reality in a county park; and the Hesler's, who have encouraged and who helped make the boxes safe and productive. There's one more piece to the puzzle -- a local Baptist church near the park entrance lets us keep our monitoring supplies safely under lock and key in a storage shed on their property. This allows multiple volunteers to access the materials from a convenient, secure location. The icing on the cake is that the time I spend personally monitoring the trail counts toward my recertification volunteer hours as a Virginia Master Naturalist, and also toward my Ruritan Club's public service hours! That's what I call a win-win outcome.

Overcoming Challenges in Bluebirding

By Doug Rogers, VBS Board member

After monitoring a bluebird trail in Darden Towe Park in Charlottesville for five years, my wife, Joanne, and I decided to start our own trail in the 2012-nesting season. We obtained permission to install nest boxes on property owned by Martha Jefferson Hospital, The Virginia Land Company and The Worrell Properties. Ann Dunn, our County Coordinator, helped us with site selection and some of the materials needed for twelve boxes.

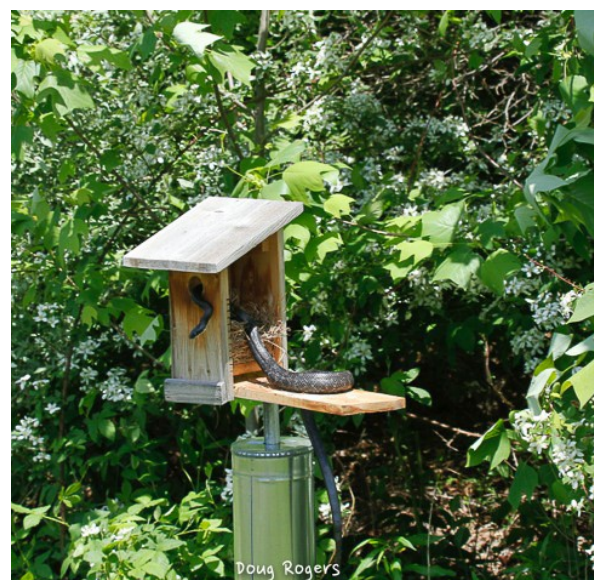
In our first season, 2012, we had 64 bluebirds and 6 tree swallows fledge. We felt that the area was a good choice. However our feelings of success were short-lived. Please see the chart below. The numbers are chicks that fledged.

Season	Bluebirds	Tree Swallows	Other species
2013	87	6	0
2014	36	5	0
2015	41	14	22
2016	37	21	18
2017	33	23	19

So, what happened? Beginning in 2014, the black rat snakes found us. Within a week they ate 15 babies. The house sparrows found us. They attacked and killed one male bluebird; we found his body in the nest box. Following that the blowflies found us.

Thanks to Christine Boran's research, we took immediate defensive action. We installed the "Two Hole Mansions" to help thwart the house sparrows;

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Snake attack, one common challenge in bluebirding



Top: Noel guard with prongs in; snakes can make their way over the edges

Bottom: Noel guards pronged out



we reshaped our Noel guards to the “pronged out” model; we installed false bottoms (made out of hardware cloth) in every box and put DE in each box as soon as the nest was built.

In 2015 the tree swallows found us. We installed “paired” nest boxes in the first area where the swallows were outcompeting the bluebirds, one for the bluebirds and one for the swallows. We now have a total of 14 boxes, which include 4 sets of “paired” boxes. This year, tree swallows were in both boxes in 3 of the 4 sets of “paired” boxes. Four of our boxes have now been taken over by house wrens and will be moved this fall.

It ain't easy being a bluebird!

What's Going On - Bluebirds Using Open - Cup Nests?

Cornell Lab of Ornithology Nestwatch

Excerpt reprinted with permission; see full blog here: http://nestwatch.org/connect/blog/eastern-bluebirds-use-an-old-robins-nest/?utm_source=Cornell+Lab+eNews&utm_campaign=f0a99c43b7-NestWatch_eNewsletter_July2017&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_47588b5758-f0a99c43b7-305438805

On May 24, 2017, Jason Estep noticed something unusual. A male Eastern Bluebird was inspecting an old robin's nest above a light fixture in an open-air facility in Franklin County, Ohio. He had seen a bluebird pair in the area on previous occasions, but did not think much of it until the male appeared to start working on this old robin's nest. Jason then monitored the nest for eight consecutive days and found, each time, a female bluebird sitting low in the nest. She appeared to be incubating!

We think that Jason probably did see Eastern Bluebirds using a salvaged nest to try to raise their own young, and there are two main reasons. (1) It is the simplest explanation, and (2) Eastern Bluebirds have been documented to occasionally use cup nests. We asked Dr. Patricia Gowaty, a Distinguished Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at UCLA who has studied bluebirds in the field for 30 years, how unusual this sighting is. According to Gowaty, the frequency of open-nesting in bluebirds is incredibly hard to know. “Almost nobody studies Eastern Bluebirds in natural nests. Focusing on nest boxes means there are a lot of variations in life history that we don't see.” Gowaty explained that we tend to canonize what we expect from bluebirds by focusing so closely on nest box results. In the book *Longleaf, Far As The Eye Can See*, one can find a photo of an Eastern Bluebird nest situated within a vertical burn scar on a tree trunk, on a short projection of bark. Gowaty points out that this type of nest may have been more common in the ancestral pine forests of the southeastern United States.



Eastern Bluebirds At robin nest
Photos © Jason Estep



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Virginia Bluebird Society
www.virginiabluebirds.org

Our email address is:
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If you have a new email address, or have recently changed it, please let us know.

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We welcome your written items and artwork (photos and drawings) for *The Bird Box*.

Nominations For VBS Board and Officers Are Open

Would you like to serve the Virginia Bluebird Society in an administrative way? Would you like to know all the inside scoop? Would you be willing to attend two meetings per year with a group of really great people who like bluebirds and enjoy spreading that joy? We are seeking people to serve for two years on the board. We will hold the election of officers and board members at our fall conference. We welcome your interest and will accept nominations now through November 18th. Would you nominate yourself or someone you know who would enjoy serving? Nominations are accepted from the floor at the conference also. For further information or to nominate please contact Cathy Hindman at (703-470-7425) or Cathy20112@gmail.com

Seeking Nominations For Special Awards

Our volunteers are the life-blood of VBS. Our members' work is done away from the lime-light, in the quiet company of nature. We realize that extra effort deserves recognition. That is why we've instituted awards to applaud the hard work put in by our members. We need your help in recognizing our dedicated volunteers. The awards will be given out at our bi-annual conference in Charlottesville on November 18th.

Here is a list of the awards:

Barbara Chambers Memorial County Coordinator of the Year – This award is given in memory of Barbara Chambers and the energy and inspiration she brought to bluebird conservation. A county coordinator's job is to collect the data for the county and pass it on to VBS. This award is given to a county coordinator who goes the extra mile to organize, inspire and further bluebird conservation in their county.

Bluebirder of the Year – This award is given to the individual who promotes bluebirds through outreach to schools and community groups, promoting good bluebird management techniques, and helping others to love and care for the bluebird.

Volunteer of the Year – This award is given to an individual who helps promote and enhance VBS. By giving of their time and energy, this individual helps VBS and the bluebird to grow and flourish in VA.

The VBS "Heritage Award" – This award is not given every year by our organization. It recognizes an individual who has been a long time bluebirder. This is a special person who lives and breathes bluebirds, and who has spent many years promoting bluebirds and the love of bluebirds.

Please contact Anne Little at thegate@cox.net to nominate someone for an award. If you are not sure what category that person should be nominated for, just submit the name with some information and we will take it from there. Nominations must be in no later than October 15th.

The Bluebird Advisor

By Anne Little



Dear Bluebird Advisor,

Is hot pepper suet safe for bluebirds? We use it in our feeder to deter squirrels, and we have had bluebirds eating it. We don't want to cause harm to our bluebirds!

Backyard Birdwatcher

Dear Backyard Birdwatcher,

There have never been any formal studies on this question but it is known that birds do not detect the hot pepper spice (capsaicin). Although birds possess the TRVP1 receptor in their nerve cells, it is not activated by capsaicin as it is in mammals. A few informal studies have shown that when two blocks of suet are placed side by side (one being hot pepper and the other being regular suet) birds will finish off the regular suet and leave the peppery suet alone. I would urge you to look at baffles for your feeder and move your feeder farther away from the trees if you can. If your squirrels are like the ones in my yard – you may have to move it about 100 feet or so. Good luck!

The Bluebird Advisor

Send your questions to vbs@virginiabluebirds.org

VBS Biennial Fall Conference
Saturday, November 18th
9:30 AM - 2:30 PM
Charlottesville, VA

Come join us Saturday, November 18 in Charlottesville for our Virginia Bluebird Society Biennial Conference from 9:30 A.M.—2:30 P.M. Every other year, VBS holds a statewide conference to connect with all our members. We are excited to have Bob Schamerhorn returning to talk about “Gardening for Birds.” We will also hear from Pattie Reum and the Kestrel box project. This is a great way to network with other bluebirders and meet your VBS Officers and Board members. The registration fee of \$25/person includes continental breakfast and lunch. You do not need to be a member to attend. Register early; space is limited. No same day registrations.

Location: Albemarle County Office Building, 1600 5th Street EXT. Charlottesville, 22902 (We will post detailed directions on the website.)

We are still accepting nominations for County Coordinator of the Year, Heritage Award, Volunteer of the Year, and Bluebirder of the Year. Details in this newsletter. Email Anne Little thegate@cox.net with nominations.

Deadline for registration is Monday, November 6th

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2017 CONFERENCE REGISTRATION FORM

Mail form and check to: Laura Abbott, 14905 Highberry Woods Terrace, Midlothian, VA 23112

Please print all information:

FULL NAME(S) OF ALL ATTENDING: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE: _____ COUNTY OF RESIDENCE: _____

EMAIL: _____

FEE is \$25 per person _____ Number Attending

Amount Enclosed: _____ (check payable to VBS)

PayPal option for registration is available on the website.

Lunch will be provided by BreadWorks Bakery & Deli. Please indicate your choice of sandwich.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| # ___ Hummus on sunflower wheat | # ___ Ham & Swiss on baguette |
| # ___ Roast Beef & Cheddar on white | # ___ Curry Chicken Salad on wheat |

Mark Your Calendars

- September - all season** Clean, repair nest boxes. Consider planting trees, shrubs that produce food for birds.
- November 6** Deadline for registering for VBS Biennial Fall Conference in Charlottesville (see page 7)
- November 18** VBS Biennial Fall Conference in Charlottesville
- January 30** Deadline for submitting articles, photos, and artwork for spring newsletter

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

We welcome articles and photos from our active VBS members. We want to share our success stories from your home and your trails. Send your 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 spring newsletter.



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